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Overcoming Toxic Polarization: Lessons in Effective Bridging

john a. powell†

Abstract

Our world is in the throes of multiple global crises, from the Covid-19 pandemic to the onset of climate change. These crises have revealed deep dysfunctions in our societies. Undergirding these dysfunctions is widening political, economic, and social polarization. Polarization has intensified to such a degree that it now constitutes what political scientists refer to as ‘negative partisanship,’ where policy positions are based on hostility to the opposition’s view. Polarization extends beyond our politics and deeply into our culture, where it straddles divides of race, geography, religion, and gender.

This Article explores the true nature of the problem of toxic polarization, the harms that flow therefrom, and what we must do about it. Advocates for unity and experts focused on de-polarization advance bridging practices as an antidote but have inadequately theorized how power and context shapes the possibilities for change. This Article argues that bridging is necessary but that such efforts must be sensitive to structural contexts. Through unique parallels drawn from dynamic film adaptations and pivotal literary works, this Article illustrates the power of context to reduce polarization and the power of narrative to shape interpretative meaning.

I. Introduction

As the startling events and crises of 2020 recede from the foreground, we collectively turn our attention to what may come next. We have experienced an unprecedented set of simultaneous challenges and crises that impact the entire world. These challenges were not the kind one could easily ignore. Nor did we know when or if they would abate or resolve. And while there is reason and space

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for optimism, there is still much room for uncertainty and concern. Will the Covid-19 vaccine work as we have been told? Who will get the vaccine and in what time frame? Can we reach herd immunity and protect our most vulnerable? Do we have reason to believe that we can return to “normal” and if not, what is the new normal? These are just some of the questions that we carry with us.

But even with the most optimistic of outcomes for the pandemic and our politics, there remain serious concerns about how we will move into the future. These concerns include climate change, advancing technology and artificial intelligence, hate speech and social media, and the rules of the global health and economic order, to list just a few. But these issues are not what I will focus on in this Article. Instead, I will discuss the more immediate social order. Can we move together as a people, as a nation, and as a world? Or will the fragmentation and toxic polarization in our societies consume us, our institutions, and possibly our country?

While most Americans appear to be concerned with the polarization that has gripped our country and indeed the world,¹ there is no consensus even among those who are most focused on this problem on how to solve it.² Maybe unsurprisingly, there is not even agreement on what the divide is. There are many contenders, and they are not mutually exclusive. These include the racial divide, or more accurately the divide between people who are raced as “white” and many people of color. There is the divide between the educated, often urban-based population centers and the less-educated exurban and rural “hinterlands,” often left behind by globalization and deindustrialization. There is the political divide between those who generally support(ed) Trump, many of whom

1. See generally Drew DeSilver, *The Polarized Congress of Today Has Its Roots in the 1970s*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (June 12, 2014), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/polarized-politics-in-congress-began-in-the-1970s-and-has-been-getting-worse-ever-since/> [<https://perma.cc/SN2L-XT47>] (describing research that revealed increasing polarization in Congress began emerging in the 1970s); see also Jean Pisani-Ferry, *Responding to Europe's Political Polarization*, RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE: FRANCE STRATÉGIE (Jan. 6, 2016), <https://www.strategie.gouv.fr/english-articles/responding-europes-political-polarization> [<https://perma.cc/M7B7-BB7C>] (describing polarization in Europe).

2. See, e.g., EZRA KLEIN, *WHY WE'RE POLARIZED* (2020) (a book long on the problem, but short on solutions). It is also true that when polarization is referenced, what is often meant is in actuality fragmentation and dehumanization. See NATHAN P. KALMOE & LILLIANA MASON, *RADICAL AMERICAN PARTISANSHIP: MAPPING VIOLENT HISTORY, ITS CAUSES, AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRACY* (2022).

believe the election was stolen, and those who opposed his candidacy.³

There are also a growing number of people who believe in the propriety of white, Christian, male dominance, especially one that is Protestant and American, both within our country and on the global stage.⁴ There are many different variations of this viewpoint, most of which would have been seen as “fringe” ten or even twenty years ago. Now it is mainstream and deeply entrenched within the Republican party, and especially by a substantial number of Trump supporters.⁵

What used to be merely a political divide has now become a deep racial and national divide. Part of the reason for this is political, racial (and to a lesser extent, gender) polarization. In 2012, for example, 88% of Mitt Romney’s support came from white voters, yet Romney only won 48.1% of the overall vote.⁶ As a corollary, President Obama won huge majorities of the non-white vote. Obama won 93% of the African-American vote, 71% of the Latino vote, 73% of the Asian vote, and 38% of the white vote.⁷ In 2020, preliminary exit polls showed that women supported Biden

3. See JOHN SIDES, MICHAEL TESLER & LYNN VAVRECK, *IDENTITY CRISIS: THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN AND THE BATTLE FOR THE MEANING OF AMERICA* (2018), for a discussion on racial division. See MARTIN SANDBU, *THE ECONOMICS OF BELONGING: A RADICAL PLAN TO WIN BACK THE LEFT BEHIND AND ACHIEVE PROSPERITY FOR ALL* (2020), for the divide between the educated urban base and the less-educated rural base. See Jan Zilinsky, Jonathan Nagler & Joshua Tucker, *Which Republicans Are Most Likely to Think the Election Was Stolen? Those Who Dislike Democrats and Don’t Mind White Nationalists*, WASH. POST (Jan. 19, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/19/which-republicans-think-election-was-stolen-those-who-hate-democrats-dont-mind-white-nationalists/> [https://perma.cc/6ZYF-4FU8], for the divide between those for and against Trump.

4. See generally ROBERT P. JONES, *THE END OF WHITE CHRISTIAN AMERICA* (2017) (providing a background of the life and “death” of white Christian America).

5. PRRI Staff, *Dueling Realities: Amid Multiple Crises, Trump and Biden Supporters See Different Priorities and Futures for the Nation*, PUB. RELIGION RSCH. INST. (Oct. 19, 2020), <https://www.prri.org/research/amid-multiple-crises-trump-and-biden-supporters-see-different-realities-and-futures-for-the-nation/#page-section-0> [https://perma.cc/SS44-YFVQ]; see also Gene Demby & Shereen Marisol Meraji, *The White Elephants in the Room*, NPR: CODE SWITCH (Nov. 18, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/17/935910276/the-white-elephants-in-the-room> [https://perma.cc/UHY4-PQKS] (discussing white Evangelical voters’ overwhelming support for Trump).

6. john a. powell, *The New Southern Strategy*, UC BERKELEY: BERKELEY BLOG (Jan. 30, 2013), <https://blogs.berkeley.edu/2013/01/30/the-new-southern-strategy/> [https://perma.cc/K5TK-UC25] [hereinafter powell, *New Southern Strategy*].

7. *President Exit Polls – Election 2012*, N.Y. TIMES, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2012/results/president/exit-polls.html> [https://perma.cc/FZ8A-SJSH].

over Trump by a record 15 points.⁸ By many accounts we are the most divided as a country since the Civil War.⁹

There were and are questions being posed about whether our democracy and its institutions can survive this intense and toxic degree of polarization. Research shows that voters are more animated and energized by opposing the other party than supporting their own policy preferences.¹⁰ A political leader of an opposition party supporting a bill leads to sharp opposition, regardless of the content of the bill.¹¹

We are divided by geography, race, and gender, but also by facts. One only has to look at the struggle over the virus and mask wearing to get a sense of how deeply we are divided by facts.¹² But it extends also to beliefs about whether the election was fraudulently stolen or the reality of climate change.¹³ Some amount of disagreement on basic scientific or empirical facts may indeed be healthy, but we have long since passed that point. It is clear that polarization in our contemporary American democracy has devolved into a clear example of extensive factional divisions. Quite often when discussing the notion of factional divisions, we fail to understand that these very divisions have the ability to ignite conflict and intertwine social and political identities regardless of geographic location.¹⁴ This refusal to acknowledge the severity of factionalism within American democracy makes the system susceptible to manipulation by “enterprising politicians at home and malevolent adversaries abroad.”¹⁵

8. Zachary B. Wolf, Curt Merrill & Daniel Wolfe, *How Voters Shifted During Four Years of Trump*, CNNPOLITICS, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/11/politics/election-analysis-exit-polls-2016-2020/> [<https://perma.cc/G8U8-7648>].

9. Julia Manchester, *Analyst Says US is Most Divided Since Civil War*, HILL (Oct. 3, 2018), <https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/409718-analyst-says-the-us-is-the-most-divided-since-the-civil-war> [<https://perma.cc/7C4H-8AVZ>].

10. Stephen P. Nicholson, *Polarizing Cues*, 56 AM. J. POL. SCI. 52, 64 (2012).

11. *Id.* at 56–59.

12. Carroll Doherty, Jocelyn Kiley & Nida Asheer, *Republicans, Democrats Move Even Further Apart in Coronavirus Concerns*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (June 25, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/06/25/republicans-democrats-move-even-further-apart-in-coronavirus-concerns/> [<https://perma.cc/JQ6K-MBKQ>].

13. See Zilinsky et al., *supra* note 3, for beliefs about the stolen election. See Deborah Lynn Guber, *A Cooling Climate for Change? Party Polarization and the Politics of Global Warming*, 57 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 93, 98 (2012), for a dispute of climate change facts.

14. Reuben E. Brigety II, *The Fractured Power: How to Overcome Tribalism*, FOREIGN AFFAIRS (Mar. 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-16/fractured-power> [<https://perma.cc/XLJ8-XQSQ>].

15. *Id.*

Trump, before stepping back, reportedly considered declaring martial law and asking the states to nullify the elections.¹⁶ He also pressured members of Congress and the Vice President to refuse to accept the certified results of the state's electoral college votes.¹⁷ Not only was he able to get many elected officials to support these positions, many of the 74 million Americans that supported him also supported these positions. I could go on, but my point is that the polarization that has engulfed us, and indeed much of the world, did not go away because of the election and the end of the calendar year.¹⁸

While there will be disagreement as to the major cause for the polarization, I believe there are a number of factors that work together. Some of these reasons include rapid change in the spheres of technology, demographics, climate, and the economy. These underlying conditions will continue to challenge us. I will assert that these changes are not just impacting our condition, but also who we are—our individual and collective identities. We are experiencing not just a physical threat but also an ontological threat.¹⁹

While I will explore some of these issues below, the primary focus of this Article will be on how we move forward to depolarize our society. I will focus especially on one of the most frequently suggested methods, one with which I have been associated.²⁰ I am

16. Felicia Sonmez, Josh Dawsey, Dan Lamothe & Matt Zapposky, *A Frustrated Trump Redoubles Efforts to Overturn Election Result*, WASH. POST (Dec. 20, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/tuberville-electoral-challenge-trump-conversation/2020/12/20/1658573e-42db-11eb-b0e4-0f182923a025_story.html [https://perma.cc/7WPM-7RBP]; see also Toluse Olorunnipa, Josh Dawsey, Rosalind S. Helderman & Emma Brown, *Trump Assembles a Ragtag Crew of Conspiracy-Minded Allies in Flailing Bid to Reverse Election Loss*, WASH. POST (Dec. 22, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-assembles-a-ragtag-crew-of-conspiracy-minded-allies-in-flailing-bid-to-reverse-election-loss/2020/12/21/d7674cd2-43b2-11eb-b0e4-0f182923a025_story.html [https://perma.cc/7G7E-25AL].

17. Michael S. Schmidt, *Trump Says Pence Can Overturn His Loss in Congress. That's Not How It Works.*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 15, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/05/us/politics/pence-trump-election.html> [https://perma.cc/T5LX-49TU].

18. See john a. powell, *Foreword* to TRUMPISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS (Osagie K. Obasogie ed., 2020), <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/trumpism-and-its-discontents/foreword> [https://perma.cc/P67H-CTYP] [hereinafter powell, *Foreword*].

19. See JOHN A. POWELL, RACING TO JUSTICE: TRANSFORMING OUR CONCEPTIONS OF SELF AND OTHER TO BUILD AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY 135–62, 197–228 (2012) [hereinafter POWELL, RACING TO JUSTICE].

20. john a. powell, *Bridging or Breaking? The Stories We Tell Will Create the Future We Inhabit*, NONPROFIT Q. (Feb. 15, 2021), <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/bridging-or-breaking-the-stories-we-tell-will-create-the-future-we-inhabit/> [https://perma.cc/V344-887B] [hereinafter powell, *Bridging or Breaking?*].

referring to “bridging” as an approach to address polarization and move us to the concept of belonging.²¹ Bridging entails engaging with people who hold different views, values, or identities.²²

The call for bridging, even if that exact term is not used, is rapidly expanding in the United States and beyond.²³ I will assert that bridging in support of belonging can be a valuable tool but that it cannot do its work unless it is grounded in a more nuanced frame than is sometimes acknowledged. Part of this nuance is to situate bridging both in the context of structures and power.

There have been some efforts in this direction in the larger context of social capital, the theory of resources and power that exists through social relationships.²⁴ But these insights have largely been absent from the current push for bridging adopted by certain activist circles. This absence may be a critical reason for the attractiveness of bridging discourse in various parts of our society today. The failure to engage structures and power will mean almost certain failure to overcome the deep toxic polarization that we are facing. While activists are likely to have an analysis of power, their demands that addressing power dynamics be a precondition for working across divides can have the effect of indefinitely postponing bridging.²⁵

21. Rachel Heydemann & John A. Powell, *On Bridging: Evidence and Guidance from Real-World Cases*, OTHERING & BELONGING INST. (Aug. 19, 2020), <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/on-bridging> [<https://perma.cc/3AZ9-BR8W>].

22. John A. Powell, *How Bridging Creates Conditions to Solve Problems*, OTHERING & BELONGING INST. (Nov. 2, 2017), <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/john-powell-how-bridging-creates-conditions-solve-problems> [<https://perma.cc/7AUy-QTNM>].

23. E.g., *Weave: The Social Fabric Project*, ASPEN INST., <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/weave-the-social-fabric-initiative/> [<https://perma.cc/2MD4-E6JM>].

24. See, e.g., Tristan Claridge, *Explanation of Types of Social Capital*, SOC. CAP. RSCH. (Feb. 11, 2013), <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/explanation-types-social-capital/> [<https://perma.cc/27QA-2QUA>] (contrasting “linking” and “bridging” social capital based upon gradients of power).

25. There are some theorists who have raised this issue of power, but they are not generally part of the folks embracing bridging nor deeply engaged in activism. They include folks such as Derik Gelderblom, Jennifer McCoy, Benjamin Press, Murat Somer, and Ozlem Tuncel. See Derik Gelderblom, *The Limits to Bridging Social Capital: Power, Social Context and the Theory of Robert Putnam*, 66 SOCIO. REV. 1309 (2018); Jennifer McCoy, Benjamin Press, Murat Somer & Ozlem Tuncel, *Reducing Pernicious Polarization: A Comparative Historical Analysis of Depolarization* (May 5, 20220) (Carnegie Endowment for Int’l Peace, Working Paper). A frequently asked question is if we can bridge and break at the same time. And while undoubtedly the answer is yes, at some point, the breaking undermines bridging. Putnam addresses this in part through the lens of bonding. See ROBERT D. PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY* 402–14 (2001) [hereinafter PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE*]. He notes that when one is

Many activists and community organizers are predisposed toward skepticism of bridging and perhaps even the larger theory of social capital.²⁶ Part of the reluctance is grounded in the foundational position of power building that is core for many activists. From this perspective, the challenge to bridging becomes not a call for correction but a rejection of the underlying objective. It is only a slight exaggeration to suggest that at one pole there are those calling for bridging without addressing power to be the principal way to solve polarization. At the other pole is the rejection of bridging either outright or to load up the preconditions for bridging so that it effectively makes bridging a complete non-starter.²⁷ It is these positions that this Article attempts to resolve by suggesting other possibilities. I believe we must consider the issue of power to make bridging meaningful. But I also believe that putting on a number of preconditions before we begin the process of bridging would also be a mistake. I will also discuss the different goals we might have for bridging.

In the next part of the Article, I discuss the problem of polarization in more detail, and then relate polarization to various identity expressions. Following that, I will briefly lay out some parameters of bridging, bonding, and breaking and how they relate to addressing polarization on one hand and promoting belonging on the other. I will attempt to show that the failure to engage the issue of power and structural contexts will greatly limit the efficacy of these efforts. I will then look at the issue of power as raised by some organizers and suggest a reexamination of power and how to begin to bridge even as we struggle with the issues of power and structures. I will suggest this is emergent which will have to be learned and corrected by doing. But while it is critical to address power, I will also assert that to delay the process of bridging in the hope of first establishing equal power is not productive. Instead,

tied deeply to one's own group, it is more likely that one will exclude other groups.
Id.

26. Humnath Bhandari & Kumi Yasunobu, *What is Social Capital? A Comprehensive Review of the Concept*, 37 *ASIAN J. SOC. SCI.* 480, 484–85 (2009).

27. For a discussion of the call to bridge in the complete absence of power analysis, there has been a growing chorus of scholars and public intellectuals demanding that people's identities be set aside to come together over "universal issues," embodied most notably in Mark Lilla's New York Times article on identity politics, Mark Lilla, *The End of Identity Liberalism*, *N.Y. TIMES* (Nov. 18, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html> [<https://perma.cc/W2WS-63KF>]. See Olúfemi O. Táíwò, *Being-in-the-Room-Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference*, *PHILOSOPHER* (OCT. 30, 2020), <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/essay-taiwo> [<https://perma.cc/82S4-Z5JA>], for a critique of the perceived need to load up on preconditions before bridging can occur that takes place in some organizing circles.

what I suggest is that even while one attends to the issue of power, one must also be willing to explore bridging.

II. Polarization and Politics

After the murder of George Floyd, there was a series of global social justice demonstrations, unprecedented in scale and diversity of participants.²⁸ Millions of Americans across the United States and supporters across the globe took to the streets in support of Black Lives and demanded racial justice. From small towns to boardrooms of some of the wealthiest corporations in the world, there was both a call for racial justice and a deep stirring not to shy away from a profound focus on anti-Black racism. People of all races and virtually every sector participated.

This effort was more than just demonstrating; there was also an outpouring of money and commitment to an unprecedented extent in the United States.²⁹ This is all the more impressive as there was no single leadership or organization at the head of these protests.³⁰ The best-selling books for weeks focused on better understanding and addressing anti-Black racism. The terms “anti-Black racism,” “systemic racism,” and “white supremacy” were used by heads of state, police chiefs, and others more often associated with maintaining the status quo than advocating for racial justice.³¹ President Biden, in his inaugural address, made a commitment to address white supremacy.³² This was the first time that a president had publicly used the term.

28. See Derrick Bryson Taylor, *George Floyd Protests: A Timeline*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 5, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html> [<https://perma.cc/4279-7SWR>] (detailing the protests that occurred throughout the United States following George Floyd’s murder).

29. See, e.g., Shane Goldmacher, *Racial Justice Groups Flooded with Millions in Donations in Wake of Floyd Death*, N.Y. TIMES (June 16, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/us/politics/black-lives-matter-racism-donations.html> [<https://perma.cc/WQ3S-URQU>] (discussing the record volume of donations sent to racial justice causes and bail funds in the wake of the murder of George Floyd).

30. See, e.g., Ruschell Boone, *As George Floyd Protests in NYC Became More Organized, the Leaders Got Younger*, SPECTRUM NEWS (July 1, 2020), <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2020/07/01/george-floyd-protests-nyc-leaders-who-are-they> [<https://perma.cc/MK2W-C53S>] (indicating that protestors in New York and nationally had no central figure leading the movement).

31. See, e.g., Justin Worland, *America’s Long Overdue Awakening to Systemic Racism*, TIME (June 11, 2020), <https://time.com/5851855/systemic-racism-america/> [<https://perma.cc/ND3A-C7CX>] (noting that “mainstream conservatives like former President George W. Bush join[ed] moderate democrats like Joe Biden” in embracing the term “systemic racism” and calling for “a national reckoning”).

32. President Joseph R. Biden, Inaugural Address at the United States Capitol (Jan. 20, 2021).

Yet, only a few weeks earlier, on January 6, 2021, a large group of Trump supporters attacked the capital with the goal of stopping or disrupting the transfer of the presidential power.³³ General Mattis, who was the Secretary of Defense under Trump, warned of the growing threat of white nationalism and white supremacy, in part reflected in the insurrection.³⁴ He also noted that Trump clearly shoulders some of the responsibility.³⁵ Other former aides and staffers for Trump have expressed similar concern, as had the Federal Bureau of Investigation.³⁶

I cite these examples in particular to demonstrate that this concern is not coming just from Democrats or the political left, but from neutral observers. To have a sitting president push for an insurrection in the transfer of power is unheard of in the American context. It is this action that led to Congress impeaching Trump for an historic and unprecedented second time.³⁷ Despite this, Trump continues to gather wide support. Not only did more than 70 million Americans vote for him—the second largest number in history—even after his first impeachment, 68% of Republicans signaled support for his running for office again, and more than 55% indicated they would support his potential candidacy.³⁸ In addition, 76% believe the election was stolen or had substantial fraud, with a

33. Dan Barry, Mike McIntire & Matthew Rosenberg, *Our President Wants Us Here: The Mob That Stormed the Capitol*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 9, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/us/capitol-rioters.html> [https://perma.cc/S9SC-WCCD].

34. See Jeffrey Goldberg, *James Mattis Denounces President Trump, Describes Him as a Threat to the Constitution*, ATLANTIC (June 3, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/06/james-mattis-denounces-trump-protests-militarization/612640/> [https://perma.cc/TDE5-V7MB].

35. Amanda Macias, *Mattis Blames Trump for Violence at Capitol, Says His Actions 'Poison Our Respect for Fellow Citizens'*, CNBC (Jan. 6, 2021), <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/06/mattis-blames-trump-for-violence-at-capitol-says-his-actions-poison-our-respect-for-fellow-citizens.html> [https://perma.cc/UXA8-FGLR].

36. See, e.g., Aaron C. Davis, *Red Flags: As Trump Propelled His Supporters to Washington, Law Enforcement Agencies Failed to Heed Mounting Warnings about Violence on Jan. 6*, WASH. POST (Oct. 31, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2021/warnings-jan-6-insurrection/> [https://perma.cc/23CK-GG93] (describing the red flags officials at the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and other agencies witnessed indicating that supporters of Trump were planning violence leading up to January 6th).

37. H.R. 24, 177th Cong. (2021).

38. Elaina Plott & Shane Goldmacher, *Trump Wins CPAC Straw Poll, but Only 68 Percent Want Him to Run Again*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 28, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/28/us/politics/cpac-straw-poll-2024-presidential-race.html> [https://perma.cc/AY76-A4WD].

sizable number supporting extralegal action to right what they perceive as a wrong.³⁹

I cite these facts not to legitimize these beliefs but to set the context to understand the nature of the polarization that the country faces. By many accounts, the country has not been this divided since the Civil War.⁴⁰ And while there is not a clear consensus on the nature and cause of the divide, there are some aspects that most people agree on. One of the axes of the divide is politics. At this juncture there is a sharp divide between those who identify as Democrats and Republicans.⁴¹

It is sometimes assumed that polarization is a byproduct of ignorance, as if it were just people misunderstanding or not knowing each other.⁴² One need only to look at the Senate to recognize the fallacy of this assumption. Many of the people who are there have known each other for decades.⁴³ And some of the most significant enablers of a stolen election and the victimhood of white America are people who, at times, have been both very clear and critical of Trump's destructive and divisive ideology.⁴⁴ Yet, many of these folks have deeply aligned themselves with Trump and Trumpism.⁴⁵ Party affiliation, as this evidence demonstrates, is one of the societal divides that indicates polarization, but it goes much deeper than that.

39. Chris Cillizza, *Three-Quarters of Republicans Believe a Lie about the 2020 Election*, CNNPOLITICS (Feb. 4, 2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/04/politics/2020-election-donald-trump-voter-fraud/index.html> [<https://perma.cc/G9NH-5XGP>].

40. Manchester, *supra* note 9.

41. See DeSilver, *supra* note 1 (describing the polarization of Congress that has widened since the 1970s).

42. See, e.g., Isabella Nassar, *We Are Way Too Polarized*, HEIGHTS (Oct. 24, 2021), <https://www.bcheights.com/2021/10/24/we-are-way-too-polarized/> [<https://perma.cc/JS2Q-AWL9>] (arguing that open-mindedness and addressing ignorance is a solution for polarization).

43. Cf. Bridget Mulcahy & Mackenzie Weinger, *25 Longest-Serving Senators*, POLITICO (Aug. 10, 2014), <https://www.politico.com/gallery/25-longest-serving-senators?slide=0> [<https://perma.cc/F2ML-99UA>] (listing senators who served in Congress for decades, some of whom overlapped); *List of Current Members of the U.S. Congress*, BALLOTPEdia, https://ballotpedia.org/List_of_current_members_of_the_U.S._Congress [<https://perma.cc/YCX9-NFNC>] (providing the length of time current Senators have served).

44. See, e.g., Madeline Conway, *9 Times Ted Cruz Insulted Donald Trump Before Endorsing Him*, POLITICO (Sept. 23, 2016), <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/ted-cruz-donald-trump-insults-endorse-228594> [<https://perma.cc/ZDU6-AC9H>] (detailing times Ted Cruz, a later supporter of the stolen election theory, was highly critical of Trump).

45. See, e.g., David Drucker, *Book Excerpt: How Ted Cruz Was Converted to Trumpism*, FOX NEWS (Nov. 2, 2021), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/ted-cruz-converted-trumpism> [<https://perma.cc/HE2Y-2N63>] (describing Ted Cruz's alignment with Trumpism).

III. Polarization and Identity

The previous section clearly shows that political polarization is intensifying, as the two major political parties embody a growing divide. But they straddle many other divides, including those of race, religion, national origin, urban/rural, sexual orientation, and much more. One's party affiliation stands for more than just one's position on issues and policies. The Republican Party, especially since Nixon, has been tinged by a strategy that appealed to white voters, the "southern" strategy and "dog whistle politics," but more recently flirted with white supremacy and white nationalism.⁴⁶ The Republican Party is no longer the party of Lincoln but the party of Trump.

It is not just Trump's reaction to the white nationalist march in Charlottesville⁴⁷ or his call for the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by,"⁴⁸ but that Trump has espoused consistent hostility to people of color, immigrants, and Muslims. In his first official speech declaring his candidacy for President, he attacked both immigrants and Muslims.⁴⁹ He has a track record of denigrating Black public figures as having a "low IQ," such as CNN anchor Don Lemon or Congresswoman Maxine Waters, a virulent racist trope.⁵⁰

These tendencies are found not just in his rhetoric, but in his policies and views of his allies. Many of his high-level advisors, from Steve Bannon to Steve Miller, have long histories of being affiliated with reactionary and fringe political movements, even neo-Nazis, or have been credibly accused.⁵¹ Many extremist groups and their

46. See generally IAN HANEY LOPEZ, *DOG WHISTLE POLITICS: HOW CODED RACIAL APPEALS HAVE REINVENTED RACISM AND WRECKED THE MIDDLE CLASS* (2015) (providing a background on racial politics and the middle class).

47. See Glenn Kessler, *The 'Very Fine People' at Charlottesville: Who Were They?*, WASH. POST (May 8, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/08/very-fine-people-charlottesville-who-were-they-2/> [<https://perma.cc/28SY-CWQ7>] (discussing the violence in Charlottesville and Trump's response).

48. Courtney Subramanian & Jordan Culver, *Donald Trump Sidesteps Call to Condemn White Supremacists—and the Proud Boys Were 'Extremely Excited' About It*, USA TODAY (Sept. 30, 2020), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/29/trump-debate-white-supremacists-stand-back-stand-by/3583339001/> [<https://perma.cc/B7CM-MZH4>].

49. TIME Staff, *Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech*, TIME (June 16, 2015), <https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/> [<https://perma.cc/KA95-Z4W6>].

50. Davis Smith, *Trump's Tactic to Attack Black People and Women: Insult Their Intelligence*, GUARDIAN (Aug. 10, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/10/trump-attacks-twitter-black-people-women> [<https://perma.cc/684F-RPCW>].

51. Tina Nguyen, *Steve Bannon Has a Nazi Problem*, VANITY FAIR (Sept. 12, 2017), <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/09/steve-bannon-has-a-nazi-problem>

leaders viewed Trump as their savior, leader, or guiding political force. Neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, for example, celebrated Trump's election and his post-Charlottesville equivocations by shouting "hail Trump."⁵² An entirely new movement, known as Q'Anon, similarly views Trump as a savior and promulgated extreme theories about Jews and Democrats trying to take over America.⁵³ In the attack on the Capitol, white supremacist, Nazi, and confederate symbols and icons were proudly displayed.⁵⁴ These groups have supported Trump, and Trump has emboldened them. One of the great divides in the country today is support or non-support for Trumpism.⁵⁵ The Republican party can then be thought of as a party organized around white nationalism and white supremacy.

In terms of policies promulgated by the Trump administration, they, too, were largely consistent with an ideology of white supremacy and white nationalism. The centerpiece initiative of the Trump candidacy was the "wall" with Mexico, which was never built.⁵⁶ Instead, the Trump administration adopted a series of brutal and dehumanizing anti-immigration policies, including those that separated young migrants from their parents.⁵⁷ In addition to this, the Trump administration initiated the largest drawdown of

[<https://perma.cc/PDF5-4YSY>]; Michael Edison Hayden, *Stephen Miller's Affinity for White Nationalism Revealed in Leaked Emails*, SPLC (Nov. 12, 2019), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/11/12/stephen-millers-affinity-white-nationalism-revealed-leaked-emails> [<https://perma.cc/NXF7-MTL3>].

52. Aleem Maqbool, *Hail Trump: White Nationalists Mark Trump Win with Nazi Salute*, BBC NEWS (Nov. 22, 2016), <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-38057104/hail-trump-white-nationalists-mark-trump-win-with-nazi-salute> [<https://perma.cc/Z2K6-C34E>].

53. Ewan Palmer, *QAnon Believers Have Lost Their Savior in Trump, But Conspiracy Theory is Building Power in GOP*, NEWSWEEK (Nov. 12, 2020), <https://www.newsweek.com/qanon-conspiracy-trump-future-election-biden-1544462> [<https://perma.cc/9NGS-AXMR>].

54. Matthew Rosenberg & Ainara Tiefenthäler, *Decoding the Far-Right Symbols at the Capitol Riot*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 13, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/video/extremist-signs-symbols-capitol-riot.html> [<https://perma.cc/J76P-V7RU>].

55. See Michael Dimock & John Gramlich, *How America Changed During Trump's Presidency*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Jan. 29, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/2021/01/29/how-america-changed-during-donald-trumps-presidency/> [<https://perma.cc/JY5R-UYXH>] (describing the deeply partisan and personal divides caused by Trump's presidency).

56. See, e.g., Lucy Rodgers & Dominic Bailey, *Trump Wall: How Much Has He Actually Built?*, BBC NEWS (Oct. 31, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46824649> [<https://perma.cc/B4SY-ASYM>]; Simon Romero & Zolan Kanno-Youngs, *Trump's Incomplete Border Wall Is in Pieces that Could Linger for Decades*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 17, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/us/border-wall-trump-biden.html> [<https://perma.cc/S7H3-D5LT>].

57. See, e.g., Michael D. Shear, *Trump and Aides Drove Family Separation at Border, Documents Say*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 14, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/14/us/politics/trump-family-separation.html> [<https://perma.cc/QF7R-Y5GZ>].

the refugee resettlement program, bringing it to its lowest level in generations.⁵⁸

Perhaps the most offensive executive order issued by the Trump administration was the so-called “Muslim Travel Ban,” a series of executive orders that restricted travel to the United States from heavily Muslim countries.⁵⁹ Although courts struck down the first two iterations, the Supreme Court ultimately upheld the third version, a decision that may well prove notorious.⁶⁰

In addition to anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant policy, the Trump administration jettisoned both the Obama-era Fair Housing regulations relating to the federal duty to “affirmatively further fair housing” and govern “disparate impact” claims.⁶¹ The Trump administration also implemented a broad rule restricting the scope of federal anti-racism curriculum, in addition to characterizing Black Lives Matter protestors as terrorists or criminals.⁶²

Another cleavage that maps to the political divide is between rural and urban populations. Rural, in this context, is used as a stand in for low education whites. Urban is used as a stand in for mixed race and more educated populations. Despite these heuristics, it is clear that rural voters turned out in record numbers to support Trump, while urban areas were heavily Democratic leaning.⁶³

58. Bobby Allyn, *Trump Administration Drastically Cuts Number of Refugees Allowed to Enter the U.S.*, NPR (Sept. 26, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/26/764839236/trump-administration-drastically-cuts-number-of-refugees-allowed-to-enter-the-u> [<https://perma.cc/J579-X7PN>].

59. Stephen Menendian, *Refugee and Immigration Executive Order is Unconstitutional and Antithetical to a Fair and Inclusive Society*, OTHERING & BELONGING INST. (Feb. 3, 2017), <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/refugee-and-immigration-executive-order-unconstitutional-and-antithetical-fair-and-inclusive-society> [<https://perma.cc/2PWK-T4MG>].

60. *Trump v. Hawaii*, 138 S. Ct. 2392, 2423 (2018). It is notable that in the same decision, the Court overruled *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944), as if overturning that notorious precedent could shield it from history’s sharp glare.

61. Stephen Menendian, *Disparate Impact Liability Is the Best Remedy for Structural Racism*, U.C. BERKELEY: BERKELEY BLOG (Oct. 22, 2019), <https://blogs.berkeley.edu/2019/10/22/disparate-impact-liability-is-the-best-remedy-for-structural-racism/> [<https://perma.cc/W23V-993Z>]; Stephen Menendian, *Fair Housing and Affordable Housing Are Not the Same Thing*, U.C. BERKELEY: BERKELEY BLOG (Jan. 8, 2020), <https://blogs.berkeley.edu/2020/01/08/fair-housing-and-affordable-housing-are-not-the-same-thing-the-trump-administrations-latest-attack-on-integration/> [<https://perma.cc/W23V-993Z>].

62. Stephen Menendian, *Why Trump’s Diversity Training Ban is Unconstitutional*, U.C. BERKELEY: BERKELEY BLOG (Oct. 16, 2020), <https://blogs.berkeley.edu/2020/10/16/why-trumps-diversity-training-ban-is-unconstitutional/> [<https://perma.cc/9S4Y-EVL7>].

63. Hannah Love & Tracy Hadden Loh, *The ‘Rural Urban Divide’ Furthers Myths about Race and Poverty – Concealing Effective Policy Solutions*, BROOKINGS INST.

There have been a number of books and articles trying to better understand the growing polarization grounded in white and ethnic supremacy and nationalism and what can be done about it.⁶⁴ One of the big divides in liberal circles is to insist that polarization is either class-based, culture-based, or race-based.⁶⁵ Many of these efforts assume that there is one primary cause and that other expressions of these phenomena are a result of that cause. So, for example, in the assertion that polarization is economically based, the argument goes that the economic anxiety caused by globalization and inequality has been exploited by the elites, in this case Trump, to stir up racism. Therefore, the conclusion that follows is that if we can fix economic inequality, the racial tension will largely go away. This argument suggests that whites continue to organize and vote against their self-interest, and a strong economic and inclusive narrative is what we must adopt. The more stringent version of this story is to not talk about race because it only further alienates this population and that most of the racial concerns are really economic concerns.⁶⁶

There are others who insist that the primary driver for our problem is grounded in racism.⁶⁷ At the edges it suggests that all whites engage in racial resentment, which implies that resentment is always latent and can be activated under the proper circumstances. There are two factors that make this activation more robust. One factor is the changing demographics resulting in a decrease in the white majority.⁶⁸ Relatedly, the other factor is that any improvement in conditions, especially for Black people, is seen as a decline in white people's well-being.⁶⁹ The decline need not be

(2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/12/08/the-rural-urban-divide-further-myths-about-race-and-poverty-concealing-effective-policy-solutions/> [https://perma.cc/P6M5-LS48].

64. See Carlos Lozada, *The United Hates of America*, WASH. POST (Oct. 30, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/10/30/polarization-books-trump-election/?arc404=true> [https://perma.cc/442E-GJYN].

65. See, e.g., Michael Powell, *A Black Marxist Scholar Wanted to Talk About Race. It Ignited a Fury.*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 18, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/us/adolph-reed-controversy.html> [https://perma.cc/D5AM-WV3S] [hereinafter Powell, *Black Marxist Scholar*].

66. *Id.*

67. See *id.* (mentioning that some see racism as the root of the issue).

68. See, e.g., Brittany Farr, *A Demographic Moral Panic: Fears of a Majority-Minority Future and the Depreciating Value of Whiteness*, U. CHI. L. REV. ONLINE (Aug. 16, 2021), <https://lawreviewblog.uchicago.edu/2021/08/16/rrs-farr-demographic/> [https://perma.cc/Z7ZP-ZWKQ].

69. See, e.g., Heather McGhee & Ezra Klein, *What 'Drained-Pool' Politics Costs America*, N.Y. TIMES: EZRA KLEIN SHOW (Feb. 16, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-heather-mcghee.html>

material or even real, suggesting that white people's status over Black people and others is paramount. This position partially explains how some white people could vote for Obama then Trump; as long as Black people are not seen as a threat, it is acceptable, even morally praiseworthy, to vote for the first Black President. What changed—what Trump and others were able to do—was to activate both a sense of threat and resentment, partly from the ascendance of Obama himself to the presidency.⁷⁰

There are many other variants of these arguments, including a cultural theory that ultimately backs into identity politics, but indirectly. The notion of “identity politics” is often brought up to challenge the legitimacy of a group's position: to attack marginalized groups' calls or demands as if there are larger and possibly more important issues that should receive focus. Any instance of people of color raising issues or bringing up matters that are important to them but are not “universal” or are possibly even divisive is often labeled “identity politics.”⁷¹

Implicit in these critiques is an assumption that if we could focus on the “real” issues like the economy or the environment, we could unify. This argument came up often in the 1920s and 1930s in the context of the NAACP pushing for an anti-lynching law.⁷² A more recent version of this assertion comes up in relation to the #MeToo movement by women or the challenge to policing or racialized mass incarceration from Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors.⁷³ The burden is placed on these groups to avoid identity

[<https://perma.cc/X6N9-G6LJ>].

70. See generally FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, *IDENTITY: THE DEMAND FOR DIGNITY AND THE POLITICS OF RESENTMENT* (2018) (examining how an increasing demand for recognition of one's identity has led to the emergence of populist nationalism and the implications of “identities” being defined in progressively narrower forms).

71. Mycah Denzel Smith, *What Liberals Get Wrong about Identity Politics*, NEW REPUBLIC (2017), <https://newrepublic.com/article/144739/liberals-get-wrong-identity-politics> [<https://perma.cc/N78B-HEQQ>].

72. *NAACP's Anti-Lynching Campaigns: The Quest for Social Justice in the Interwar Years*, NAT'L ENDOWMENT FOR HUMANS., <https://edsitement.neh.gov/curricula/naacps-anti-lynching-campaigns-quest-social-justice-interwar-years> [<https://perma.cc/U25X-NAH5>].

73. See, e.g., David French, *There Is a Profound Difference Between Justice and Identity Politics*, NAT'L REV. (Jan. 8, 2018), <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/01/metoo-movement-meaning-beyond-identity-politics/> [<https://perma.cc/W2N8-RJ3S>] (claiming that “[t]he #MeToo movement must choose between an allegiance to identity politics and the pursuit of justice”); Eljeer Hawkins, *Black Lives Matter and Marxism*, SOCIALIST ALT. (Feb. 2015), <https://www.socialistalternative.org/marxism-fight-black-freedom/black-lives-matter-marxism/> [<https://perma.cc/N25N-8ZS6>] (discussing how the Black Lives Matter movement can benefit from incorporating a class-based approach).

politics, as these politics are both seen as polarizing and even petty.⁷⁴

This is a kind of weaponized identity politics in service of the dominant group. As Francis Fukuyama and others have asserted, all politics are identity politics.⁷⁵ The journalist Ezra Klein asserts that “[u]nfortunately the term ‘identity politics’ has been weaponized. It is most often used by speakers to describe politics as practiced by members of historically marginalized groups. If [you are] black and [you are] worried about police brutality, [that is] identity politics.”⁷⁶ This position is clearly problematic. The underlying concern of those who broadly attack some groups for engaging in identity politics is breaking and polarization, a concern to which I will return later.⁷⁷

Despite four years of the Trump presidency, many of these debates remain unresolved. It is clear, however, that leadership and narrative play a significant role in the processes that engender polarization across identity boundaries, which is why politics is often intertwined. Some argue that white resentment has always been there, and that Trump just gave it permission to come out. There may be some truth in this position, but there are reasons to believe it is radically overstated.

IV. White Supremacy and Racial Heterogeneity

The white resentment that builds on white nationalism and white supremacy is at least as old as the country itself. It has expressed itself in different ways at different times.⁷⁸ Some will read this to mean that this expression of racism is inevitable and that it is just what America is. That reading would be a serious mistake. America has always been many things, and it is not preordained which one will come to dominate. At times, our leaders have tamped down or shifted views. At other times, they have inflamed passions and stoked fear.⁷⁹ Much depends on which

74. See Alicia Garza, *Identity Politics: Friend or Foe?*, OTHERING & BELONGING INST. (Sept. 24, 2019), <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/identity-politics-friend-or-foe> [<https://perma.cc/BD3B-7RVF>].

75. FUKUYAMA, *supra* note 70, at 105–09.

76. KLEIN, *supra* note 2, at xx–xxi.

77. See Denzel Smith, *supra* note 71. See Powell, *Bridging or Breaking?*, *supra* note 20, for a discussion of breaking.

78. See generally DAVID ROEDIGER, *THE WAGES OF WHITENESS: RACE AND THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS* (rev. ed. 2007) (examining the development of white working-class racism in the United States).

79. Examples abound from history, but consider President Lyndon Johnson’s efforts to pass civil rights legislation despite hostility to equal rights earlier in his

narratives prevail and which messages win out: our better angels or our darkest demons.

White supremacy and its cousin, white and Christian nationalism, are not descriptive of people's phenotype but of an ideology. You do not have to be white to embrace white supremacy, nor do all white people embrace white supremacy or white nationalism. Indeed, there is a great deal of survey data to suggest that American attitudes on race have at times gotten substantially more inclusive and more open to things like integration and interracial marriage.⁸⁰

Many wrongly assumed that Americans would not support a Black person running for president. Obama won handily not once but twice. While it is true that he did not get the majority of white voters, he did as well as other Democratic presidential candidates. People are still trying to make sense of the large number of people, especially white people, that voted for Obama and then voted for Trump.⁸¹ While all the reasons might not be obvious, it is clear that racial attitude, and by extension racial polarization, continues to shift.

There is no monolith among whites, Blacks, or any other group. What may look like a solid racial divide is always more complicated. Some would make the divide or racial issue more of a geographic issue.⁸² Where that geography should be drawn is not entirely clear. Certainly, the south is deeply associated with white dominance, the legacy of Jim Crow, and all of the connotations that accrue to it.⁸³

political career. See ROBERT CARO, *THE LYNDON JOHNSON YEARS (1982–2012)* (detailing the life and political career of former President Lyndon Johnson in a multi-volume biography). Consider also political figures like George Wallace who built his political career on stoking racial division. See powell, *Foreword, supra* note 18.

80. See, e.g., Justin McCarthy, *U.S. Approval of Interracial Marriage at New High of 94%*, GALLUP (Sept. 10, 2021), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/354638/approval-interracial-marriage-new-high.aspx> [<https://perma.cc/Z38V-PX8V>] (tracking the increase in approval of Black-white interracial marriage in the United States).

81. See, e.g., Zack Beauchamp, *A New Study Reveals the Real Reason Obama Voters Switched to Trump*, VOX (Oct. 16, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/10/16/17980820/trump-obama-2016-race-racism-class-economy-2018-midterm> [<https://perma.cc/9PBN-64SN>].

82. See, e.g., Sarah Savat, *The Divide Between Us: Urban-Rural Political Differences Rooted in Geography*, NEWSROOM (Feb. 18, 2020), <https://source.wustl.edu/2020/02/the-divide-between-us-urban-rural-political-differences-rooted-in-geography/> [<https://perma.cc/98PK-XHQ5>] (previewing Andrew J. Reeves' study finding that proximity to big cities carries greater import than individual identities in driving the political divide).

83. See generally GRACE ELIZABETH HALE, *MAKING WHITENESS: THE CULTURE OF SEGREGATION IN THE SOUTH, 1890-1940* (2010) (tracing how white southerners re-established their position over newly freed Black people following the Civil War and

We have an historical sense that the Civil War had at least three dominant parties: Democrats, Republicans, and the south. While Democrats and Republicans have shifted positions on race and civil rights, the south has been more predictably opposed to civil rights and embracing white dominance.⁸⁴ The suburbs have been a northern proxy for the south. Republicans have organized around the use of racial resentment and fear to make the suburbs a Republican stronghold.⁸⁵ And most of the effort to integrate schools in the United States has been at odds with the northern suburbs.⁸⁶

Some say the Civil Rights Movement did not die in the south but in Cicero, a white working-class Chicago suburb.⁸⁷ But then we just had an election in the old, solid south where a Black man and a Jewish man won Senate seats. Not only did they perform well in the deep south, they performed well in many Georgian suburbs.⁸⁸ Still there is much polarized voting in the United States, certainly more than the U.S. Supreme Court recognized when it gutted the Voting Rights Act,⁸⁹ but not as much as Trump and Republicans expected in the last presidential election.⁹⁰

The debates over race, class, and geography described in the previous part of this Article founder on a few crucial shoals.⁹¹ While much of the identity over class as cause seems right at an experiential and empirical level, much of this analysis does not adequately account for the constructedness and, at times, the fluidity of race. White identity is not just constructed, it is also

how modern “whiteness” came to be).

84. See Powell, *New Southern Strategy*, *supra* note 6.

85. *Id.*

86. See GREGORY S. JACOBS, *GETTING AROUND BROWN: DESEGREGATION, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE COLUMBUS PUBLIC SCHOOLS* 163 (1998).

87. See, e.g., Samuel Momodu, *The Cicero Riot of 1951*, BLACKPAST (Jan. 22, 2022), <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/events-african-american-history/the-cicero-riot-of-1951/> [<https://perma.cc/RT6J-38GA>] (describing the riot that took place in the Chicago suburb of Cicero, where “a mob of approximately 4,000 whites attacked an apartment building an African American family had recently moved into”).

88. Nate Cohn, *Why Warnock and Ossoff Won in Georgia*, N.Y. TIMES: UPSHOT (Jan. 8, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/upshot/warnock-ossoff-georgia-victories.html> [<https://perma.cc/P7PY-H2TQ>].

89. *Shelby Cnty. v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013).

90. Some would explain Georgia by looking at the changing demographic and the increase in the number of Black voters in Georgia as well as their higher-than-normal participation both in the general and special elections. Still many whites in the suburbs broke from Trump and from the Republicans in the runoff. See Nate Cohn, Matthew Conlen & Charlie Smart, *Detailed Turnout Data Shows How Georgia Turned Blue*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 17, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/17/upshot/georgia-precinct-shift-suburbs.html> [<https://perma.cc/885C-DB5M>].

91. See Powell, *Black Marxist Scholar*, *supra* note 65.

elastic, encompassing groups formerly known as non-white (such as the Irish, Italians, or Armenians), or racializing groups formerly white as non-white.⁹² It is conceivable that who is white can be expanding so that despite demographic shifts white majority status is maintained indefinitely.⁹³

What is also taken for granted is that there will not only be a coherent group understood as Black, but there will also be a fairly coherent group of people of color. People of color, as a category, includes all the groups that are not considered white. Clearly, the sustainability and coherence of such a varied group is questionable. This is important for addressing and understanding polarization between groups. I will not say more about this issue here except to note that most pundits interpret and create race as a fixture that is permanent instead of contested processes that constantly change.⁹⁴

V. Bridging and Contact Theory

This Article has asserted the existence of layered but varied expressions of polarization. By many accounts the United States, and much of the world, is experiencing not only heightened intensity related to polarization, but also the difference in form, given the overlapping of gender, racial, geographic, and political polarization.⁹⁵

In the United States, bridging has been one of the dominant if not the primary process that has been called upon to address polarization. There are a number of groups, including the one I direct, that have advanced bridging to address polarization.⁹⁶ Bridging can be described as looking for common ground, often through deeply listening to others' stories and pain.⁹⁷

There are many ways to think of bridging. It is similar in some ways to inter-group "contact theory" and the associated efforts to address prejudice and stereotyping initiated from the research of

92. See generally IAN HANEY LÓPEZ, *WHITE BY LAW: THE LEGAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE* (2d ed. 2006) (examining the construction of race and "whiteness" and the flexibility that the concept of whiteness possesses).

93. See generally GEORGE YANCEY, *WHO IS WHITE?: LATINOS, ASIANS, AND THE NEW BLACK/NONBLACK DIVIDE* (2003); HANEY LÓPEZ, *supra* note 92 (arguing that if Latinx people become functionally white, then we will be more white in 2050 than we are now).

94. One only has to look at the identity categories in the census. It is unusual for them to be stable over any ten-year period. See MICHAEL OMI & HOWARD WINANT, *RACIAL FORMATION IN THE UNITED STATES* (3d ed. 2014) (examining how concepts of race are created, transformed, and used).

95. See powell, *Bridging or Breaking?*, *supra* note 20.

96. See Heydemann & powell, *supra* note 21.

97. See powell, *Bridging or Breaking?*, *supra* note 20.

Gordon Allport and modified and updated by Pettigrew and Tropp.⁹⁸ In broad strokes, contact theory studies the conditions under which inter-group contact will lead to cooperation rather than conflict.⁹⁹ Some of the insights derived from this research have been presented by the Supreme Court in important cases involving race and diversity. For example, these underlying themes were crucial in the University of Michigan affirmative action cases.¹⁰⁰ In these cases, various *amici*, especially the U.S. military, persuasively argued to the Court that diversity enhanced the quality of leadership and improved outcomes while reducing racial stereotypes.¹⁰¹ In this sense, contact theory is based on the presupposition: “If only I knew you better.” It is often associated with empathic listening or practice.¹⁰²

The concept of bridging is often associated with the scholarship of Robert Putnam, whose work examines the connections between diversity, trust, and community.¹⁰³ In his most famous book, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam addresses the need to bridge with groups different than our own in order to build social capital and for the smooth working of society.¹⁰⁴ But before looking at the dominant way of talking about and practicing bridging with an

98. See generally GORDON W. ALLPORT, *THE NATURE OF PREJUDICE* (1954) (examining the roots of prejudice and discrimination); Thomas Fraser Pettigrew & Linda R. Tropp, *A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory*, 90 J. PERS. SOC. PSYCH. 751 (2006) (testing inter-group contact theory and building on Allport’s scholarship); Tania Singer, *Empathy and Compassion*, 24 CURRENT BIOLOGY R. 875 (2014) (analyzing empathy and compassion in a neuroscientific study). See Jim A. C. Everett, *Intergroup Contact Theory: Past, Present, and Future*, INQUISITIVE MIND (Diana Onu, ed., 2013), <https://www.in-mind.org/article/intergroup-contact-theory-past-present-and-future> [<https://perma.cc/9DFR-WPVA>], for a history.

99. Allport initially theorized four key conditions for positive intergroup effects: equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support by social and institutional authorities. Pettigrew & Tropp, *supra* note 98, at 752.

100. See *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003); *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 244 (2003).

101. Joe R. Reeder, *Military Amicus Brief Cited in Supreme Court’s Decision in the University of Michigan Case*, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, GREENBERG TRAURIG LLP (June 27, 2003), <https://www.gtlaw.com/en/news/2003/6/military-amicus-brief-cited-in-supreme-courts-decision-in-the-university-of#main-content> [<https://perma.cc/8GXD-LG6B>].

102. See John A. Powell, *On How Bridging Creates Conditions to Solve Problems*, OTHERING & BELONGING INST. (Nov. 2, 2017), <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/john-powell-how-bridging-creates-conditions-solve-problems> [<https://perma.cc/7AUU-QTNM>].

103. Robert D. Putnam, *E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century the 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture*, SCANDINAVIAN POL. STUDS. 137 (2007) [hereinafter Putnam, *E Pluribus Unum*].

104. PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE*, *supra* note 25.

important nod to Putnam, let us first look at some of the lessons and discussions as it relates to contact theory.

While much of the work related to building cooperation and social capital has raised issues as to the conditions necessary to reduce prejudice, these efforts relate, as the term suggests, to judgments made about people with insufficient information.¹⁰⁵ But many prejudices are more than interpersonal suspicions or simply mistakes in judging one's character. As more recent work has shown, prejudices are social constructs that are doing some work for society and that are reflected in structural norms and cultural attitudes.¹⁰⁶ One could even call them our collective mental habits. They are often policed by laws and norms.

Still, these prejudices are easier to maintain under certain conditions. Or, to put it differently, there should be some conditions that cause prejudices to break down. One of those conditions is contact.¹⁰⁷ While it may be possible to hate under many conditions, there is reason to believe it is easier at a distance. But contact alone will not reduce prejudice. If we see groups in a role that confirms a bias or stereotype, then contact can be counterproductive to bias reduction.¹⁰⁸ What we see must still be interpreted. Contact theory has tried to address these concerns by exploring under what conditions prejudice is reduced. These conditions include relative equality between groups, goal sharing, and non-competition between groups.¹⁰⁹

Pettigrew goes further and asserts that this is not just a process between individuals, but also that there is a role for institutions and leaders.¹¹⁰ He maintains that people will try to align with institutional norms and are especially impacted by the leaders of their institution.¹¹¹ Pettigrew also challenges the

105. See, e.g., Putnam, *E Pluribus Unum*, *supra* note 103, at 141 ("As we have more contact with people who are unlike us, we overcome our initial hesitation and ignorance and come to trust them more.")

106. See Pettigrew & Tropp, *supra* note 98.

107. See Everett, *supra* note 98.

108. See Thomas F. Pettigrew, *Intergroup Contact Theory*, 49 ANN. REV. PSYCH. 65, 68 (1998). *But see* Pettigrew & Tropp, *supra* note 98, at 766 ("[C]onditions should not be regarded as necessary for producing positive contact outcomes, as researchers have often assumed in the past. Rather, they act as facilitating conditions that enhance the tendency for positive contact outcomes to emerge.")

109. There is not an agreed set of conditions, but there is a general agreement that some conditions promote reduction in prejudice and others do not even when there is contact. See Pettigrew, *supra* note 108, at 69–70.

110. See Pettigrew & Tropp, *supra* note 98, at 766.

111. See *id.*

presumption that the best way to change society is to work at the individual level or that it is even the best place to start.¹¹²

Even in talking about the nature of prejudice and how to overcome it, we have limited our inquiry. It is clear that much of what is considered polarization is not a function of prejudice. The limitation of a prejudice perspective is clearly demonstrated by the work of political scientist Ashley Jardina. In her work studying white identity formation and politics, she points to the need to focus on the construction and maintenance of a shared identity and interests within a group.¹¹³ While she acknowledges that reducing intergroup racial conflict will to a degree require the addressing of animus and outgroup prejudice, she asserts that this approach is too concerned with individual attitudes.¹¹⁴ Rather, Jardina's research concludes, attention should be oriented to understanding group identity formation—and in her work specifically, a growing sense of and attachment to white identity.¹¹⁵ Many whites, she finds, are growing more concerned with protecting group status and positionality.¹¹⁶ This type of group favoritism does not require animus toward an outgroup. Equally important, such group identification is not individually based. Jardina traces the increase in the salience of white identity to a threat that throws into question the status of white hierarchy, which she contends does not need to be material or real.¹¹⁷

Group identification and consciousness is similar to the concept of bonding and, as noticed by Putnam and others, can lead to exclusion and friction even without animus. To the extent that bridging is focused on addressing prejudice, it will not engage group-based solidarity and consciousness. Similarly, two groups might be in sharp disagreement not because of prejudice but because of interest, situatedness, or power. If that is the case, we could not expect a shift in prejudice to do the work of addressing polarization. This is the subject I will next address.

VI. Bridging and Power

The call for bridging is not an abstract exercise. All over the United States, Europe, and many other parts of the world there

112. *Id.*

113. See ASHLEY JARDINA, WHITE IDENTITY POLITICS 155–215 (Cambridge Univ. Press 2019).

114. *Id.* at 187.

115. *Id.* at 173–77.

116. *Id.* at 179–84.

117. *Id.* at 188.

continues to be extreme polarization and factions. President Biden has made the call for unity and reducing polarization a central part of his appeal, candidacy, and goals for his presidency.¹¹⁸ When one considers the state of the nation, this is more than understandable. What is less clear is if unity can be achieved and how we should proceed toward this goal.

There is often an explicit assumption that the way to address this extreme polarization is through bridging.¹¹⁹ Bridging is when members of different groups reach out and engage with one another.¹²⁰ In trying to access this possibility, it is important to understand the problem(s), the different forms bridging can take, and under what conditions bridging is likely to be effective. This part of the Article tackles this matter.

There have been a number of books and articles essentially asking non-Trump supporters to understand the culture and identity of Trump supporters in the hopes of bridging this divide.¹²¹ Some of these arguments ask us to understand the racism and sexism of these groups. One version of this argument goes something like this: “They have been looked over. They are not respected. They have been looked down upon.” The issue is not that any of these assertions are entirely wrong, but the matter is presented both as a one-directional problem and a suggestion of not just understanding but a call for something more.

Many of these calls for understanding are also asking us to overlook both the harm that Trump supporters have caused and their own agency and responsibility.¹²² In some versions of this

118. Domenico Montanaro, *Biden Called for Unity in His Inaugural Address. He Might Find It Hard to Come by*, NPR (Jan. 20, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/20/958490425/biden-says-he-wants-to-unite-america-he-might-find-unity-hard-to-come-by> [https://perma.cc/5AFT-RMVS].

119. See, e.g., Grace Kim, *Political Polarization in America: Solutions to Bridge the Partisan Divide*, WILLIAMS REC. (Dec. 9, 2020), <https://williamsrecord.com/447122/opinions/political-polarization-in-america-solutions-to-bridge-the-partisan-divide/> [https://perma.cc/FP5T-EVUX]; *Our Members - Bridging Ideological Divides*, BRIDGE ALLIANCE, https://www.bridgealliance.us/our_members_bridging_ideological_divides [https://perma.cc/URG5-U4WR].

120. See GREATER GOOD SCI. CTR., BRIDGING DIFFERENCES PLAYBOOK 9, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Bridging_Differences_Playbook-Final.pdf [https://perma.cc/7QQJ-PLCS].

121. See, e.g., BEN BRADLEE, JR., *THE FORGOTTEN: HOW THE PEOPLE OF ONE PENNSYLVANIA COUNTY ELECTED DONALD TRUMP AND CHANGED AMERICA* (Little, Brown ed., 2018); ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD, *STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LAND: ANGER AND MOURNING ON THE AMERICAN RIGHT* (The New Press 2016).

122. See generally Robert Pondiscio, *The Miseducation of Donald Trump Voters*, FORDHAM INST. (Jan. 6, 2016), <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/miseducation-donald-trump-voters> [https://perma.cc/YF28-DPRU] (“For those of us in education and reform, perhaps it’s time to make white and blue collar the new

argument, it is tantamount to demand that we accept an identitarian argument in favor of white nationalists (including accepting symbols of hate, which are packaged as “heritage”) and to avoid the identity concerns expressed by marginalized groups.¹²³

Obviously, there is a value to understanding different groups, even those who would attack us. But there is something deeply problematic when pundits and elites call out marginalized groups for focusing on issues of concern to us (such as police brutality, confederate statues, etc.) but call on us all to understand the white nationalist mindset. There is some indication that this might be changing after the insurrection in early January 2021, but it is nonetheless pervasive.¹²⁴ Bridging cannot be unidirectional.

A simple way of thinking about bridging is to consider how we reach across identity boundaries to people or groups that are considered different than us in some salient way. That difference can hinge on race, politics, geography, ideas, interests, religion, age, party affiliation level, and so on. It is not the difference itself but how we individually and collectively make sense of the difference that provides social meaning.

This point is worth lingering on. Too often, it is assumed that attachments to those who are similar, and disquiet if not hostility to those who are different, is natural or even an evolutionary byproduct for humans. This is not correct. As one scholar explains, “human beings are cognitively programmed to form conceptual categories and use them to classify the people they counter.”¹²⁵

black . . . it’s time once again to widen the definition of rights at risk to include working class white people too.”).

123. See the discussion of the early use of the term identitarian politics. I am also suggesting that what identities are fixated on in these scenarios is really the traits most salient to the dominant group. The need to appease this group can have the impact of further marginalizing some groups. For example, President Obama, in an effort to avoid inducing anxiety for a predominantly white voter block, opted to avoid discussing race. There are a number of studies that show that even if whites would benefit, they will oppose a program if they think Blacks and other people of color will also benefit. One of the attacks on the Affordable Care Act was the concern that Blacks would benefit. See generally MARTIN GILENS, WHY AMERICANS HATE WELFARE: RACE, MEDIA, AND THE POLITICS OF ANTIPOVERTY POLICY (1999) (analyzing the public’s complex, misinformed, and racially-charged views on welfare); ALBERTO ALESINA & EDWARD GLAESER, FIGHTING POVERTY IN THE US AND EUROPE: A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE (2006) (comparing U.S. welfare opponents’ success in using racial and ethnic divisions to attack redistribution programs to a more homogenous Europe, with fewer divides to exploit to demonize the poor).

124. See Ryan Fan, *I Urged Sympathy for a Trump Supporter. Then January 6th Happened*, AN INJUSTICE (Jan. 6, 2022), <https://aninjusticemag.com/i-urged-sympathy-for-a-trump-supporter-then-january-6th-happened-eed0009bf80> [<https://perma.cc/Q3MX-R9DJ>].

125. DOUGLAS S. MASSEY, CATEGORICALLY UNEQUAL: THE AMERICAN

While that is true, the differences that we notice and the value and meanings we place on these differences are largely socially constructed, not naturally occurring.¹²⁶ In other words, although humans naturally classify people and things into categories, the meaning ascribed to those things is not predetermined, but socially determined.

Some differences are seen as unimportant and not an impediment to deep human connection and understanding.¹²⁷ Which differences and similarities are important is both social and situational. This is true not just between people but also within us, as our minds work out these meanings. In that sense our identity is also social and situational. If our identities such as race and nationality are socially constructed, then the difference we attach to these socially constructed groups must also be social. There is no natural identity. Our identities are forged in circumstance and social context. Amartya Sen observes that when a people is attacked or threatened based on a particular trait or condition, that trait or condition is likely to become the most salient, enlarging the salience of that identity.¹²⁸

While most people today in the United States, and possibly Europe, would agree that a toxic level of polarization is currently plaguing society and the very functioning of government, there is less agreement on both the cause and the solution.¹²⁹ One of the major disagreements over the cause of polarization in the United States is whether our deep division is rooted in existing and growing economic inequality, or if it is our ascriptive identities like race, gender, religion, disability, immigration, or some combination.¹³⁰ Also proposed is whether the most important division is political—liberal versus conservative. This matter was covered in previous parts of this Article.¹³¹

Of course, these factors may be related with each other and interact or compound. The longstanding fight on the left is whether

STRATIFICATION SYSTEM 242 (2007).

126. SCOTT E. PAGE, *DIFFERENCE: HOW THE POWER OF DIVERSITY CREATES BETTER GROUPS, FIRMS, SCHOOLS, AND SOCIETIES* (2008).

127. *Id.* at 307–08.

128. AMARTYA SEN, *IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE: THE ILLUSION OF DESTINY* 3–4 (2007).

129. *See, e.g.*, Thomas B. Edsall, *America Has Split, and It's Now in Very Dangerous Territory*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 26, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/opinion/covid-biden-trump-polarization.html> [<https://perma.cc/3XWA-4KT8>].

130. john a. powell, *Inequality in the Twenty-First Century*, UC BERKELEY: BERKELEY BLOG (May 2, 2014), <https://blogs.berkeley.edu/2014/05/02/inequality-in-the-twenty-first-century/> [<https://perma.cc/WG4X-Y9N3>].

131. *See supra* Section II.

to locate the struggle against unjust social structures in an analysis of class alone or identity (like race or gender) alone. Others ask whether class and identity are intertwined, and, if so, to what extent? There is reason to believe that all of these forces are at play and are interactive or iterative. Here, however, I focus on identity. But I am using the concept of identity closer to a social construct and in a way that marks our structural situatedness.¹³²

Iris Young makes the observation that much of what is called identity or identity politics is really about how we are situated within structures.¹³³ Another way of thinking about identity is to describe it in terms of what an individual feels or one's lived experience. This more subjective and affective way of talking about identity offers a weak basis for analysis. It suffers from both the problem of what Charles Tilly and others call methodological individualism as well as essentialism.¹³⁴ This approach of methodological individualism and essentialism makes assumptions about the unit of analysis and the nature of humans. There is a great deal of criticism, including some of my prior writing, challenging this frame.¹³⁵

But I want to make a different point here, which is that a subjective and affective conceptualization of identity leads us to approach bridging devoid of analysis of power and structural context. Yet, much of the discussion of identity and bridging happens through the lens of essential methodological individualism.¹³⁶ Within the limitations of this framework, bridging is too narrowly defined and applied to be an effective intervention against polarization. So while I am largely focused on identity, the

132. See *The Project on Law and Mind Sciences at Harvard Law School*, SITUATIONIST, <https://thesituationist.wordpress.com/about-plsps-at-harvard-law-school/> [<https://perma.cc/734H-HZN8>] (analyzing the concept of identity as a social construct).

133. IRIS MARION YOUNG, *JUSTICE AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE* 98 (2011).

134. *Methodological Individualism*, SCIEDIRECT, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/methodological-individualism> [<https://perma.cc/2QFY-K2ZF>].

135. See generally POWELL, *RACING TO JUSTICE*, *supra* note 19 (“This way of looking at suffering has led some to assume that any effort to address it must also be on individualistic or human terms. These assumptions are false. As previous discussion has emphasized, much surplus suffering is caused not by individuals directly, but by structures and institutional arrangements.”); JUDITH BUTLER, *GENDER TROUBLE: FEMINISM AND THE SUBVERSION OF IDENTITY* 23 (2006) (“Whereas the question of what constitutes ‘personal identity’ within philosophical accounts almost always centers on the question of what internal feature of the person establishes the . . . self-identity of the person through time, the question here will be: To what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity . . . ?”); Wendy Brown, *Wounded Attachments*, 21 *POL. THEORY* 390 (1993).

136. FUKUYAMA, *supra* note 70, at 159–60.

category that we know of as identity can be expanded as a concept to account for structural location and power relationships, which allows for a broader and more robust application of the term.

Let us turn back to Putnam and Pettigrew. The intergroup contact theorists focus on cooperation and having a common purpose or goal as a means of prejudice reduction.¹³⁷ Similarly, Putnam focuses on individuals as members of groups in order to figure out how to foster greater social capital.¹³⁸ He has shown a strong focus on people that are more or less equal horizontally.¹³⁹ It is not because he is unaware of power and inequality, but he is concerned that strong power differentials or too much inequality can distort the process.¹⁴⁰ But the solution cannot be therefore to ignore power. It may be that there is a background assumption that the individual or groups are relatively equal and that issue need not be attended to. But generally that is not the case.

While I agree with Putnam that power and inequality can distort the effort to bridge, I think they must be faced. Consider some examples of how power can distort bridging in terms of empathy or cooperation from popular culture. The first is the landmark book by Richard Wright, *Native Son*.¹⁴¹ The other is a popular recent movie, *Knives Out*.¹⁴²

The premise of *Native Son* is that a young Black man, Bigger Thomas, is hired by a rich white family to be a chauffeur.¹⁴³ The daughter, Mary Dalton, returns from college, and Bigger is charged with driving her and her boyfriend Jan Erlone around.¹⁴⁴ The white couple insists on riding in the front of the car with Bigger.¹⁴⁵ They insist that the social hierarchies of race and class are meaningless.¹⁴⁶ They fail to recognize Bigger's profound discomfort.

At one point in the book, Mary and Jan express interest in getting something to eat.¹⁴⁷ Bigger asks where they would like to go, and they answer that they would like to go to Bigger's favorite place to eat.¹⁴⁸ Bigger objects, but they ignore his objection, and they

137. Pettigrew, *supra* note 108, at 66–67.

138. Putnam, *E Pluribus Unum*, *supra* note 103, at 137–38.

139. *See, e.g., id.* at 153.

140. *See, e.g., id.* at 151.

141. RICHARD WRIGHT, *NATIVE SON* (1940).

142. *KNIVES OUT* (Lionsgate 2019).

143. WRIGHT, *supra* note 141, at 44.

144. *Id.*

145. *Id.* at 58–59.

146. *Id.* at 59.

147. *Id.* at 60.

148. *Id.*

all go to a place where Mary and Jan are not just the only white people, but also the only wealthy people in the restaurant.¹⁴⁹ It is something that Bigger and the other patrons all notice. Later, Bigger is put into an even more compromising situation as he carries Mary into her bedroom after she has passed out from drinking.¹⁵⁰ I will leave it to the reader to discover what happens afterward.

The second example I would like to draw out is from the film *Knives Out*.¹⁵¹ Marta Cabrera is one of the protagonists. She is Latinx and works for a rich white family as a caregiver for the patriarch of the family. Marta lives with her undocumented mother. In one scene, members of the Thrombey family, the wealthy white family for whom Marta works, are discussing what should be the appropriate policies for undocumented people living in the United States. In the middle of the discussion, one of the family members turns to Marta and asks her if she has an opinion on this matter. Unlike the folks in *Native Son*, the family members are aware that they are putting her into a difficult position. She cannot fully engage in the conversation because of the power difference.

In both examples, the effort to bridge—to share an empathic space—superficially appears to be between individuals in the scene. But there are clearly background structures at play that implicate both power and identity that shape their response and experience. Much of the work on bridging today assumes that it is between individuals that don't understand each other and may harbor prejudice.¹⁵² There is a further assumption that this prejudice is actually hurt and misunderstanding.¹⁵³ For these reasons, bridging efforts are often tied to healing, a concept that is often equally bereft of power context and suffers from methodological individualism.¹⁵⁴ In the next section, I begin to chart our way out of these dilemmas.

VII. Bridging and Structural Change

There is a serious problem that occurs from not being recognized or being misrecognized.¹⁵⁵ There has been important work showing that the failure to be seen as a self can undermine

149. *Id.* at 61–63.

150. *Id.* at 72.

151. *KNIVES OUT*, *supra* note 142.

152. *See, e.g.*, Pettigrew, *supra* note 108.

153. *See, e.g.*, BRADLEE, *supra* note 121.

154. *See* POWELL, *RACING TO JUSTICE*, *supra* note 19.

155. *See* Charles Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition*, in *MULTICULTURALISM: EXAMINING THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION* 25 (Amy Gutmann ed., 1994).

our sense of self.¹⁵⁶ This is also why respecting gender identity and using preferred gender pronouns is now the norm. While recognition can be important, I suggest it is a limited issue in the context of polarization. One may need to be seen and recognized, but this is not straight forward. Being recognized by certain people is much more important than being recognized by others.¹⁵⁷

One way of thinking about recognition is in a larger light than what is trying to be achieved by polarization and by bridging. Polarization can be thought of as a kind of threat. It was discussed earlier that societal change can be seen as a threat. The perceived threat does not have to be real. When pundits focus on the material threat associated with the rise of authoritarian white nationalism, they are suggesting that there is a material reality—usually read as an economic threat, perceived or real—that leads to anxiety that is exploited to gain support for white nationalism. Indeed, there is data to support such a position.¹⁵⁸

The relationship between a threat and the reaction, however, may or may not be conscious in the group's mind. This insight might also suggest a solution. If you highlight people's anxiety around the economy or other material concerns, it will be easier to bridge and they are less likely to see the "other" as a threat.

But this is not simply a mechanical process. There is always the process of making meaning. Events are not self-evident but require interpretation. So, the stories we use and have inhabited are important in how we make meaning. Given the durable role of racism, it is not a surprise how easily and readily racism is deployed as a trope during economic difficulties to explain structural problems. But the assumption that this is the full story is problematic. We are not just economic animals. We are also symbolic beings, and our sense of identity and being is always unstable.

In the article *Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma*, Jennifer Mitzen makes a number of important claims.¹⁵⁹ She distinguishes ontological threat

156. *Id.* at 25; RALPH ELLISON, *INVISIBLE MAN* (1952).

157. *See, e.g.,* Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory*, in *CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES* 100 (Peter J. Burke ed., 2d ed. 2018) (arguing that positive evaluations of self from one's in-group may serve to offset negative evaluations from others).

158. *See* Thomas B. Edsall, *Status Anxiety Is Blowing Wind Into Trump's Sails*, *N.Y. TIMES* (Feb. 9, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/opinion/trump-status-anxiety.html> [<https://perma.cc/7Y4W-QC3B>].

159. *See* Jennifer Mitzen, *Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma*, 12 *EUR. J. INT'L REL.* 341 (2006).

from security or material threats and argues that many conflicts are based on the ontological threat.¹⁶⁰ She asserts that this threat can be at a national or group level and not just at the individual level.¹⁶¹ Similarly, Pettigrew and other intergroup contact theorists draw our attention to the role of context in reducing prejudice and, by extension, polarization.¹⁶² The context is decisive in determining whether an intervention will work or not. By implication, this research suggests that the best way to change the individual heart and mind is by focusing on structure and culture.¹⁶³

Consider the racial ontological threat that white nationalists express. The statement that “Jews will not replace us” or the claim that miscegenation is white genocide are expressions of a group ontological threat. This brings us to another point: the threat is not only to the individual, but also to the group. It may or may not be based on personal prejudice or bias.

Consider Dylann Roof as he walked into a Black church and killed nine parishioners.¹⁶⁴ What is particularly disturbing about this tragedy, although not as widely reported, is that prior to his attack he was in the church having fellowship with the Black members for over an hour.¹⁶⁵ He stated they were kind to him and he liked them.¹⁶⁶ He expressed regret for having to kill them, but from his perspective, what he was doing was an act to save the white race.¹⁶⁷ Individual outreach bridging would have failed to dissuade Roof from his murderous intent. Another approach is called for.

However, within both our contemporary American democracy as well as the broader international environment, there are an assortment of situations, events, and catastrophes that could have been ameliorated through a bridging approach. For example, despite currently existing religious divisions, Pope Francis, in an unprecedented move, elected to travel to the residence of Iraq’s most

160. *Id.* at 342.

161. *Id.*

162. Pettigrew & Tropp, *supra* note 98, at 766.

163. *See id.* at 767. I am aware that this claim may be jarring to most Americans, still it is important to consider.

164. Karen Workman & Andrea Kannapell, *The Charleston Shooting: What Happened*, N.Y. TIMES (June 18, 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/us/the-charleston-shooting-what-happened.html> [<https://perma.cc/6W69-AASV>].

165. Erik Ortiz & Daniel Arkin, *Dylann Roof ‘Almost Didn’t Go Through’ with Charleston Church Shooting*, NBC NEWS (June 19, 2015), <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/charleston-church-shooting/dylann-roof-almost-didnt-go-through-charleston-church-shooting-n378341> [<https://perma.cc/P93B-5DVD>].

166. *Id.*

167. *See* Workman & Kannapell, *supra* note 164.

reclusive, and powerful, Shiite religious cleric.¹⁶⁸ He did this to ultimately bridge across religious lines to advocate for peace and actively combat persecution of those of certain faiths in the region.¹⁶⁹ It was a mutual acknowledgement of human dignity that encouraged peace building. This example highlights the possibility of bridging while reducing preconditions. It can be contended that much of the violence that becomes larger components of serious externalities of religious conflict was avoided by choosing to bridge rather than break.

Domestically, we can also observe examples of bridging being utilized to avoid tragedies. Daryl Davis, an active blues musician, often elected to sit and have conversations with active KKK members.¹⁷⁰ Despite being a Black man, Davis always entered into these conversations with no intention to change the minds of Klan members.¹⁷¹ Often after sharing meals and small discussions, these previous affiliates abandoned the Klan themselves.¹⁷² Bridging does not necessitate complete agreement, nor can one enter into a bridging relationship with another diametrically opposed expecting to change them. As such, this example serves as one of many ways to approach bridging across convoluted racial politics.

If we want to address the extreme problem today, at what level should the focus be and what is the aim? As stated earlier, most of the work focuses at the individual or interpersonal level.¹⁷³ The problem is that much of the polarization that we are most concerned with is not at the individual level but the group and/or institutional level. This is sometimes discussed in broader literature as the micro, meso, and macro.¹⁷⁴

According to the same theorist on bridging, the micro has the least amount of agency and the least amount of power.¹⁷⁵ In addition, even if you could do something at the micro, it is not likely to scale up. This is in part a problem of aggregation. Mouzelis is

168. Nicole Winfield & Qassim Abdul-Zahra, *Pope, Top Iraq Shiite Cleric Deliver Message of Coexistence*, A.P. NEWS (Mar. 6, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-islamic-state-group-ali-al-sistani-pope-francis-iraq-f95098b179f6a82157e87a7cb6cc0c3d> [<https://perma.cc/P9GW-ZRH7>].

169. *Id.*

170. Nicholas Kristof, *How Can You Hate Me When You Don't Even Know Me?*, N.Y. TIMES (June 26, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/26/opinion/racism-politics-daryl-davis.html> [<https://perma.cc/2YUQ-FXF9>].

171. *Id.*

172. *Id.*

173. *See supra* Section V.

174. *See* Derik Gelderblom, *The Limits to Bridging Social Capital: Power, Social Context and the Theory of Robert Putnam*, 66 SOC. REV. 1309, 1315–16 (2018).

175. *Id.* at 1315.

particularly critical of Putnam for falling prey to the problem of aggregation in his approach to bridging and focusing on small groups and individuals:¹⁷⁶ “[a]uthors such as Putnam (2000) and Uslaner (2009) who apply the social capital concept to societies rather than small groups, tend to think that the nature of social relations in general or in small groups can be extrapolated to society as a whole.”¹⁷⁷ This reflects what Mouzelis describes as a logic of aggregation:

[I]ndividual social capital situations cannot be aggregated because they are interdependent, and not independent. They are interdependent firstly due to powerful actors subsuming them. They are, in addition, interdependent because of the nature of their interconnections on the horizontal level. Of course, theorists such as Putnam do not study small groups as such.¹⁷⁸

One would also need to engage at the meso- and macro-scales. At these levels, one finds the influence to potentially have the reach that includes institutions and policies. Aiming at the meso- and macro-level may be necessary to create the space or shape the institutions in which bridging may become possible. Leadership is critical at these scales. Trump and Biden operate at the macro scale, shaping broad narratives, while university presidents and corporate leaders operate at the meso-scale, exercising considerable power and resources within their respective institutions or markets.¹⁷⁹

Going back to Pettigrew and others, it is clear that bridging works best under certain conditions.¹⁸⁰ It helps to know what problem one is trying to solve and what would count as a solution. Achieving better inter-group understanding and having a sense of shared humanity could be a goal within itself. Or it could be governing and passing certain policies. When it is not possible to create shared goals, or where goals are incompatible, it may not be possible to bridge. Consider if my sense of safety requires your subordination and possibly even death or incarceration, then preconditions for bridging may prove elusive. This is why white supremacy is such a challenge to de-polarization. It is not a stretch to assert that white supremacy requires non-white subordination; in fact, it is definitional to white supremacy.

176. *Id.* at 1316.

177. *Id.* at 1320.

178. *Id.*

179. *Id.* at 1315.

180. *See, e.g.,* Pettigrew & Tropp, *supra* note 98, at 766–67.

As one attempts the effort to bridge, it is important to be clear on the preconditions. If there is too great of a power differential, bridging may not be possible, and one should look at what might come out of such a process with a critical eye. Bridging between individuals may be an important task, but it is not our only task. We must also look at the meso- and macro-level. To do this, we may need to either create new conditions or spaces in which bridging can occur, but should not shy from it simply because it is difficult. We have little alternative.

VIII. Conclusion

In spite of all of the problems associated with polarization, it is clear that some polarization is not only desirable but probably inevitable. The focus of this Article is the extreme and toxic polarization that is growing and threatening us and our institutions. This polarization is deeply spread across the United States and much of the world, and it is reflected in terms of race, immigration, religion, and class.¹⁸¹ While all of these may contain a material impact, they are also related to recognition, dignity, and belonging.

Bridging and similar expressions such as calls for unity are now an animating force in addressing our toxic and harmful forms of polarization. Many people and groups come to bridging without any attention to power. While this might need to be a strong precondition, in part because the precondition is often met, one might not notice its central need. Still others like Mary and Jan in *Native Son* will assume that we are all individuals and our power does not matter if our heart is in the right place.¹⁸² This Article suggests the limit of this approach.

Community organizers will likely find obvious the call to pay attention to power as a precondition. Much of organizing starts with the primary goal of building power for marginal communities. But this desire can also lead to an unhelpful position. While power imbalance can distort the effort to bridge, the loading up of preconditions can be used as a reason not to bridge. The precondition is not a call for complete equality. Many bridging conversations are likely to take place where the power differential is not so great that the conversation must be delayed.

While this Article calls for a more complex way of looking at bridging and polarization, it is not a broad rejection of bridging.

181. See Powell, *Bridging or Breaking?*, *supra* note 20.

182. See Wright, *supra* note 141.

Bridging is a process that requires both a set of conditions, such as relative equality and agency, as well as a container with background or foreground goals participants can share. Where these conditions are lacking, there must be an effort to find or create them. Leadership, narrative, and structural sensitivity are the keys.