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Why We're Polarized

Ezra Klein (2020)
Profile Books Ltd.

Reviewed by Serena Draper

Ezra Klein's bold and thought-provoking book comes perfectly timed to speak into our current context. Following years of growing polarization, 2020 proved to be a year more tense and divided than most can remember. In the mire of the current political and cultural landscape, Klein clears a path for understanding how polarization came to exist and provides a way forward. *Why We're Polarized* is a must-read for educational leaders navigating the pervasive polarization present in today's world.

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The book's introduction considers the 2016 election in light of preceding elections. On the surface, the 2016 election, according to demographic poll data, mirrored recent elections closely. Gender, racial, and religious voting divides were largely the same in 2016 as in 2004, 2008, and 2012. Yet, despite a superficial lack of differences, Klein affirms that both a lived experience and a deeper examination of facts tells a contradictory tale. The 2016 election was, in fact, much different from previous elections. Using the skills gained as a career journalist and co-founder of Vox, Klein turns to the past, highlighting points in United States history that led to today's deeply divided state of affairs.

As he deconstructs the current political climate, Klein

unflinchingly addresses topics such as identity politics, systemic oppression, and media bias. The modern arrangement in which Democrats are liberals and Republicans are conservatives has not always existed. The parties' stark differences reflect Jewish psychologist Tajfel's research on intergroup discrimination, which Klein uses as the foundational underpinning for understanding polarization. Political middle ground exists far less now than in the past, and media outlets increasingly reflect bias towards the "loud, outrageous, colorful, inspirational, [and] confrontational" rather than the Right or Left (p. 170). These interconnected political and cultural puzzle pieces eventually reveal overlapping systems seemingly designed to perpetuate polarization.

Despite the evidently bleak state of polarization, Klein leaves readers with paths forward. Democratization, he argues, is perhaps the most fundamental cure for polarization. Equalizing political representation and coalition building should form an "immune system," protecting politics from the plague of polarization (p. 253). Finally, Klein reminds readers that depolarization begins within themselves. Identity mindfulness and a return to local politics provide tangible, healthy ways for people to begin working toward a stronger, less divided, truly *United States of America*.

Why We're Polarized offers an honest, insightful look at the current political and cultural realities facing the United States and the world. Klein's career as a journalist lends itself to a bold willingness to tell the truth about both the history and the present state of the nation. Throughout the book, Klein remains honest about his personal liberal biases and inevitable shortcomings, a remarkably difficult skill in a highly polarized society. Well aware of the tendency to tell a sanitized version of history, Klein writes, "An honest survey of America's past offends the story we tell ourselves" (p. 23).

The bulk of Klein's arguments then consist of connecting the present with the past. The book's discussion consistently oscillates between current realities and the historical facts that made them possible. Each chapter subsequently constructs an understanding of polarization utilizing examples from sports, popular culture, psychology, literature, and statistics. A surprising example of these current realities and the histories that underlay them is found in how the Dixiecrat migration of the mid-twentieth century can be tied to the modern locations of Cracker Barrel and Whole Foods. Klein's arguments are

engaging, citing both narratives and numerical evidence in building the reader's understanding.

While the intensity of polarization feels obvious, for many readers, the historical evidence Klein presents may be new and shocking. White supremacy and racial oppression are, arguably, a prominent plot line in United States history. Underlying those sins are distorted group identity and dehumanization. For individuals holding an incomplete or incorrect knowledge of United States history, Klein's skillfully presented history lesson can feel like a taxing affront to the reader's prior knowledge.

Nestled in the potentially heavy content of Klein's work, however, lies a hopeful truth. The current climate is not, somewhat surprisingly, the most polarized time in United States history. The truth that the US has grown from the polarization of the Civil War and the Civil Rights era reminds readers that the current polarization is both temporary and can lead toward progress.

Klein builds a strong case throughout the book, leaving readers staring into the face of polarization. The weight of this realization often feels inescapable. Though Klein's concluding chapter seeks to provide pathways forward, the solutions presented appear as flimsy tools in comparison to the crushing reality of polarization. Klein himself admits to the shortcomings of his proposed solutions. However, he is correct in asserting that a society cannot change that of which it remains ignorant. Understanding an environment is the first step toward change. Reversing polarization will require long-term, dedicated efforts. The world needs leaders who, like Klein, speak truthfully about polarization and are committed to working toward solutions.

For Christian educators, learning to lead amidst polarization is imperative. Called to be salt, light, and peacemakers on the earth (Matthew 5:9, 13-16), Christ-followers must resist polarization and the temptation to dehumanize the other. Though Klein does not write from a faith lens, *Why We're Polarized* should serve as one of many effective tools for modern educational leadership. Christian colleges and universities face the task of balancing their faith identity with meeting the menagerie of student needs and demands, all while maintaining their commitments to academic freedom and justice.

While Klein's work in this book proves helpful for those across multiple areas of higher education, it is perhaps most useful for student development professionals. Understanding the systemic and psychological elements of polarization aids those who work directly

with students, spurring them to ask better questions, to encourage critical thinking, and to more effectively foster thoughtful, less divided communities through counteracting polarization. *Why We're Polarized* helps student development professionals to recognize the polarization within themselves and to model the work of depolarization for their students. Christian college and university leaders possess a profound opportunity to, with the Spirit's guidance, serve as examples of how to live depolarized, whole lives. For these reasons, among others, Ezra Klein's book *Why We're Polarized* is a worthwhile read.

Serena Draper will complete her Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development at Taylor University in 2021.