

There are Two Kinds of Conservatives in the United States: Which Are *You*?

By Jacob Hess

Have you heard? Donald Trump's election was due to a racist-driven backlash of resurgent white supremacy.

It's really that simple...only, it's actually not. As [the full breadth of election data confirms](#), this view both oversimplifies and overcomplicates what happened (and what's happening).

Are there racists and bigots among the conservative right?

You bet there are.

Are there people on the right so frustrated about the growing cultural dominance of progressive America that they delight in seeing the *whole darn system* convulsing under an iconoclastic president?

Unfortunately, yes. But to suggest that all conservatives embody this ugly resentment and hostility– to put them “all in this same pot” – is at least as unfair as similar over-generalizations about the left, aka, that liberals all unitedly hope to silence conservatives, and remove both their religious liberty and second amendment rights.

If these are both distortions, then what's a more accurate characterization of what's happening?

The big disagreement. Just as there are [fundamental differences among liberal-leaning Americans](#) today, there are profound differences among conservative-leaning American that seem destined to widen further.

I'm referring here to something more fundamental than demographic or policy differences, even significant ones (e.g., Log Cabin Republicans vs. social conservative family activists) - highlighting a much more visceral difference centering around base human tendencies: Animosity, spite, vitriol, disgust and hatred.¹

Do those identifying as "conservative" embrace these darker emotions to the point of living them out – *or* do they eschew this ugliness and resist its encroachment into their own communities (and American society at large)?

We might also ask about: Truth, equality, freedom, goodness, virtue, temperance, patience, kindness, civility, and order. Do those we call “conservatives” in America uphold these ideals to

¹ To be clear, we're talking about the evident, manifest, verbalized, enacted variety...rather than the “institutional” or “ideological” type often inferred in political discussions today.

the point of living them out and caring about their manifestation in the world around them (or not?)

Over-clustering conservatives. In some cases, the distinction is pretty obvious. You've got Anne Coulter & Milo Yiannopoulos on one hand, and David Brooks and George Will on the other.

But then you have someone like Jordan Peterson, who has inspired many by speaking out about conservative ideals, albeit sometimes in a way that can feel dismissive, or even aggressive towards the left.

How to sort out conservatives along these lines is not the issue. The real problem is that these fundamental conservative differences are *hardly noticed* among progressive Americans today – and are increasingly being ignored entirely.

As [Conor Friedersdorf wrote](#) in a 2017 Atlantic piece calling on conservatives to stand up as a bulwark against populism, “Unfortunately, few people properly understand conservatives. In fact, many erroneously conflate them with authoritarians. And that is a very dangerous mistake.”

Why would that be “dangerous”? Precisely because “authoritarians” (if that’s *all* we on the right are) can never be seen as allies or collaborators by thoughtful liberals - making left-right bipartisan work (let alone civic engagement or *even friendship*) increasingly impossible. And yet it’s fair to say this perception on the left *about* the right is already strong and widespread.

Pushing back on this overgeneralization, Princeton scholar [Karen Stenner notes](#), “authoritarianism and political conservatism appear to be largely distinct predispositions” - arguing that, in contrast to many conservatives, authoritarians value “sameness” and unity to the point of being willing to use coercion to achieve it (thus, violating the constitutional law of the land).

Against this tendency, [Karen Stenner writes](#), “liberal democracy is most secure when individual freedom and diversity are pursued in a relatively orderly fashion, in a well-established institutional framework, under responsible leadership, within the bounds set by entrenched and consensually accepted ‘rules of the game.’” Referring to this passage, [Conor Friedersdorf writes](#) that “such ‘stable diversity’ should be acceptable to conservatives but abhorrent to authoritarians. On the other hand, the prospect of some wholesale overthrow of the system in pursuit of greater unity should be appealing, even exciting, to authoritarians, but appalling to conservatives.”

So why aren’t more conservatives appalled right now?

Oh, but we are! And that’s really the point here.

Far too many seem under an almost hypnotic perception that conservatives are some monolithic hoard. I’ve personally overheard more and more talk about the right that starts with something

like this: “those religious conservative, white nationalist, bigoted” (add: “aryan supremacist, Nazi”). Just one big happy (hateful) family!

As one national dialogue leader who leans decidedly left admitted to me recently, "for more and more progressives, they see Trump as representing *all* conservatives."

Making sense of *Those People*. But can you blame them? When Americans see surveys showing consistently high levels of support for President Trump among conservatives (upwards of 90%), how else are you supposed to interpret that?

Columbia University sociologist Musa al-Gharbi has some ideas. For years, this progressive, Arab-American scholar has been warning people on the left about [the consequences of their blindspots about the right](#) - arguing against [self-confirming analyses of election data](#) and cautioning that failure to confront these over-generalizations may well [help usher in Trump's re-election](#).

It's precisely these dynamics that help explain why larger majorities “supporting” Trump [may not mean what you think it means](#). There are other ways to make good sense of this collective madness: ways to dig in and stretch to understand the fear, despair and existential angst among conservatives (*and* among liberals too).

But we're not doing it – neither side is. For all of us, it seems, it's become much easier to simply embrace and promulgate the scandalous and shocking soundbites jumping off headlines even more than before – airbrushed depictions that simplify the conflict to a mere race war in the making (on the left) or a mere pre-Apocalyptic battle between good and evil (on the right).

Those most loudly sounding these war cries are impassioned enough that their respective tribalists on the left and right are wont to believe them.

Could they both be wrong, though?

Could it be that, while there *are* real, legitimate elements of truth on both sides, they are perhaps equally guilty of exaggerating that truth in service of their partisan passions? Instead of seeing *some real bigotry* on the right, for instance, liberals are increasingly talking about *all conservative initiatives* as somehow touched (on some level) by basic bigotry or prejudice. And rather than acknowledging *some* elements of progressive initiatives butting up against Judeo-Christian teaching, folks on the right are overwhelmingly convinced that most *anything the left cares about* involves some kind of anti-religious fervor.

Compared to such dramatic, combative rhetoric, a more nuanced picture (called reality) seems downright boring...even it happens to be true.

Does that even matter to Americans today?

Shrugging off deception and dehumanization. You bet it does - to lots of us (on both the left and the right).

But to many others on both sides of the aisle, let's be honest, that whole "truth" thing doesn't really matter as much anymore, at least not compared to things like...winning! As [a comprehensive 2018 survey confirmed](#), an alarmingly high number of people across the political spectrum have grown comfortable with a kind of Machiavellian dishonesty *in the service of their own cause*. We're also more willing and ready to demean and dehumanize our political opposites - on one hand, as amoral heathen destroyers of the republic, and on the other, as loveless, hateful bigots.

Could it be that THIS is what is slowly destroying us - becoming possessed by such unhinged resentment and animosity to the point of being willing to *lie* about each other (and about *reality itself*)? Are we willing and able to confront this together?

Generally speaking, the answer is no, with more and more rage-induced blindness on both sides to confronting these trends so dangerous to our republic. Indeed, rather than acknowledge these metastasizing tumors on the body politic, some are beginning to attack those who are trying to do something to remedy the polarization. Indeed, we've seen in recent days strongly-worded (and widely celebrated) critiques of those trying to draw attention to these patterns. For instance, Thomas Sugrue writes about "White America's Age-Old, Misguided Obsession with Civility."

What does it mean when our cultural suspicion and hostility comes to infect even aspirations towards civil engagement? Do we even care if hostility comes to shape every interaction we have as Americans?

The big question. Where do *you* stand on this, fellow conservative-identifying Americans? If you are among those calling yourself "conservative" in America today, are you willing to truly uphold the ideals and virtues at the foundation of our country? OR have you fully embraced a utilitarian, as-long-as-it-defends-our-interests political calculus that undeniably contradict these ideals on some basic, and obvious levels?

You can't have it both ways.

For instance, if you're willing to minimize or even mimic Trump's own "tough" way of insulting or degrading others (because, after all, *they're* just too sensitive about language anyway) – then you, by default, are also contributing to the erosion of civic society, and decreasing the space in America where all voices feel safe to contribute and participate.

If you're willing to minimize Trump's sexual infidelities, and crassness towards women (because, after all, he's "better than Hillary"), then you, *by default*, are also contributing towards a coarsening of the very culture about which we've claimed for so long to be rightfully worried.

And if you're willing to justify the separation of migrant families or overlook the hostility and fear Muslim and other minority populations have increasingly felt (because, after all, "look at all the other *good things* he's doing"), then make no mistake: you are confirming and fueling the fear so many now feel on the left.

In all the celebration about having conservative supreme court justices, can we not open our eyes and see how the very legitimacy of the court - and of democracy itself - is now being questioned by many? (precisely due to the perception of unethical duplicity by which these gains were achieved).²

If you *cannot see any of the damage Trump is causing to America long-term* – if you are not willing to acknowledge ways in which his approach is undermining constitutional and civic norms in America – then maybe it's time to reconsider whether conservatives-like-me and conservatives-like-you should even be part of the "same tribe" anymore.

Let's be honest: We may not care about the same things anymore.

In that case, to all those identifying as "conservative" in America today, I would ask: What kind of conservative *are YOU?*

² That's not to say you cannot appreciate *some things* Trump has tried to enact policy wise. Clearly, there are many conservatives who I know to be lovers of truth, liberty, equality and justice who (for pragmatic reasons I've reviewed separately) appreciate some of conservative steps taken under this administration. It's one thing to feel a relief at some conservative measures taking place. It's another thing to insist that Trump's election (overall, as a whole, in the long-run) has been a good and positive thing - focusing your energies on defending and justifying his behavior.