

Tackling Political Polarization: An Unconventional Gathering

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Perched on a narrow stretch of the Big Sur Pacific coastline, Esalen Institute is about as far away as you can get from the Washington DC and still be in the same country—geographically, but also politically, culturally, and institutionally. Yet, for a few days in the first week of October, those distances were bridged, and Esalen played host to a carefully curated, invitation-only “conclave” of 24 experts to address the subject of Political Polarization. The result was three days of political and cultural analysis that surprised the insiders, educated the outsiders, engaged both Republicans and Democrats, and left everyone encouraged—not a small achievement when it comes to such a notoriously thorny subject.



The participants gathering in the Murphy House

“The polarization between the parties exists even when the issue under debate has no ideological content,” explained Brookings Institute scholar Tom Mann on the first morning. And he pointed to a telling statistic: “In the 1960s, 5 percent or so of Democrats and Republicans said they would be unhappy if their child married somebody from the other party. Today, it’s 49 percent of Republicans, 33 percent of Democrats. People today are more unhappy if their child marries someone from another party than someone from another religion.”

Mann and his long-time intellectual partner and co-author Norm Ornstein (American Enterprise Institute) headlined the conclave, which was co-sponsored by the Institute for Cultural Evolution (ICE), a new think tank addressing political issues through cultural analysis, and the Breakthrough Institute, a growing Oakland-based environmental and political think tank. Other notable participants included NYU scholar Jonathan Haidt, author of the acclaimed *The Righteous Mind*; Rich Tafel, founder of the Log Cabin Republicans; and John Avlon, editor-in-chief of *The Daily Beast*.

“Political polarization” is one of those terms that can mean different things to different people. But however we define it, as Mann and Ornstein pointed out, its consequences can be disastrous. Constant gridlock, little interest in governing or lawmaking, no movement on key issues facing the country, a disaffection with the political process in all forms, and a growing distrust of government institutions are all faces of the fallout—not to mention the inability to respond effectively to domestic and international crises. Yet the stark urgency of those concerns also seemed far away from the soft sunsets, organic farm-to-table food, cliffside hot springs, and generally idyllic nature of the setting, providing a gentle cognitive dissonance that kept the atmosphere light even when the subjects were decidedly heavy. And it didn’t hurt the intimacy of the gathering that cell phone signals get decidedly

weariness as they make their way down Highway 1, fading to practically nothing at Esalen's gates. So while the waves crashed against the rocks outside, participants had only each other for company as they discussed and debated a number of subjects—electoral reform, filibuster reform, campaign finance, the tribalization of media, the rise of self-declared Independents, even constitutional amendments.

Some, like Avlon, argued that the recent rise of registered Independents is a healthy sign of a nation bursting out of ideological categories. Others, like political scientist Alan Abramowitz, countered with political data showing that most Independents reliably lean left or right and can in fact be more partisan than self-declared Democrats and Republicans. Ted Buerger, of the popular advocacy group No Labels, presented his organization's work in forming coalitions of "problem-solving" legislators reaching across ideological lines and challenging party politics. Haidt responded with a friendly challenge, suggesting that No Labels would be well-served to move beyond its pragmatic, technocratic approach and develop a more direct "moral appeal" to better inspire the electorate.

Laura Chasin of the Public Conversations Project shared her dialogue work aimed at promoting greater solidarity and authentically trans-partisan relationships among political and cultural combatants in the public sphere. In fact, several participants expressed similar visions of a new spirit of civility in public discourse, though Mann cautioned that incivility may only be a consequence, not a cause, of a highly polarized political environment. Steven Hayward, conservative professor at Pepperdine and AEI fellow, gave a rich (and humorous) analysis of conservative philosophy as something much more important and substantive than a simpleminded resistance to progressive change. He also detailed the ways in which he had worked with the Breakthrough Institute to find rare common ground on environmental issues. ICE founders Steve McIntosh and Carter Phipps presented their projections of a less polarized "future left" and "future right" whose emergence can be not only anticipated but also encouraged.

Whatever the topic, the conversations were direct, frank, and friendly—whether during official sessions or unofficial evening hangouts, where the salty darkness of the Big Sur coast brought consoling closure to the day's difficult deliberations. And whatever their differences, most agreed on one thing: America's turn toward hyper-partisanship will not be easy to arrest. Ultimately, its source is neither institutional nor political. It's cultural.

"It's a cultural problem more than it is a structural problem," one presenter explained. "And so it seems to me we have to think about ways to change the culture."