

Discussion Questions

for Moderates of the World, Unite: Reworking the Political Media Complex

These can be used or adapted in the context of college classes or seminars. Each question might generate anywhere from ten to twenty minutes of discussion.

Chapter 1.1 – We’re Human

1. Two of the six foundational values enumerated by Jonathan Haidt were Fairness (rendering justice according to shared rules) and Authority (submitting to tradition and legitimate authority.)

How do you think a person who prioritizes either of these would typically explain *why* the value is so important?

2. There are many facets to people’s identities, including class, gender, ethnicity, and more. However, political identity has become increasingly important to people in recent decades. What might be some reasons for that?

3. Macroeconomics describes the interplay between Gross Domestic Product, interest rates, unemployment, price inflation, government spending, and other features of the national economy. Understanding it involves systemic thinking.

How well do you think you understand macroeconomics? What level of understanding should citizens be expected to attain, and why?

4. One narrative from the 2016 presidential election was that Hillary Clinton lost because she was a woman. What is the structure of this narrative? Who are the main characters? Is there a hero or villain? What was the basic plot? Is there a moral?

Chapter 1.2 – The US and Democracy Today

1. Our national conversation could focus primarily on one of several different “issue areas.” A few were listed in the chapter: faith; inequality; climate change; culture; government. Which issue area do you think is the most critical to discuss, and why? Which, if any, do you think is talked about too much?

2. Ignoring for the moment whether one party is better/worse than the other, what is your general attitude towards *both* political parties today? Are they performing a valuable function for society? Do you see any problems with how they both function or what they both do?

3. How much attention do you pay to local and state public affairs? Why?

4. In what ways is increasing polarization a problem for our country? How serious of a problem do you think it is, and why?

Chapter 1.3 – Deception and Lies

1. In the historical tension between progressive ideas and reactionary warnings, what do you think is the principal debate of our *current* era? What specifically is the main progressive idea being pushed, and what conservative arguments (e.g. perversity, jeopardy, or futility) are made against it?

2. Recall that, in the Straw Man fallacy, a distorted or weak version of the opposition’s claim is presented, and when that weak version is refuted, the opposition view is discredited.

Why do you think Straw Man argument works so well in today’s environment of public discourse?

3. If you were an unethical political propagandist, which of these six fallacy types do you think would be the most valuable to you, and why?

- Straw Man Fallacy
- Distraction
- Motte-and-Bailey
- Cherry Picking
- False Dilemma
- Slippery Slope

4. Given the demands placed upon politicians and candidates for office, and given the actual complexity of real issues, it is even possible for politicians to avoid lying and deception at all times?

Chapter 2.1 – Socialism and Capitalism

1. How would you characterize the disconnect in public discourse between what Democratic Socialists believe and how the general public (not including Democratic Socialists) regards socialism?

2. What is the right’s main strawman version of the left’s view of socialism? (For example: “The left thinks that ...”) What is the left’s main strawman version of the right’s view of capitalism?

3. How would we know if our welfare state is the right size and composition? What clues would indicate that it has gotten too large, and what clues would indicate that it is not large enough? What element of the welfare state is the most valuable or critical?

4. What specific issues, if any, do you think Democratic Socialists are naïve or unrealistic about?

5. What are some arguments for and against employees having more power in the corporations employing them?

6. Obviously, a framing of “socialism versus capitalism” is imprecise. And, based on “typical” definitions of each, it is a false dilemma, because our system will always have elements of both. Given that, how could public discussion of the matter be improved to make it more productive?

Chapter 2.2 – Climate Change

1. What is the most accurate way to define “climate alarmism”? For proponents of climate action, is climate alarmism a good tactic for stimulating government action? Why or why not?

2. What elements of climate science do you most wish you had a stronger understanding about? How difficult do you think it would be to gain that understanding?

3. To what extent do you think climate skeptics base their views on knowledge of the science? If that is not their usual basis, what do you think *is* the main cause of their beliefs?

4. Oil companies are private, and their executives are responsible for shareholder profits. Should they be sued now for the way they hid their research findings about climate in the past? Is there any legal basis for doing so?

5. Do you think that most young members of activist groups like Extinction Rebellion believe that the human race is actually at risk of extinction? Do they mentally retain some level of cautious uncertainty? If not, describe how you suspect they may think about it.

Chapter 2.3 – Culture War

1. What do you think about the *concept* of systemic racism? Is it easy to understand? Why or why not? What percentage of the citizenry knows what it is?

2. Do you think a “colorblind” philosophy for race relations is a good thing or a bad thing? Why?

3. On racial issues, do you think there is any middle ground in which the right and the left could reach meaningful compromises? Why or why not?

4. What is the right’s main strawman version of the left’s position on race? What is the left’s main strawman version of the right’s position on race?

5. Transgender issues have recently been raised to a prominent level in public discourse. What do you think explains its prominence?

6. The US has a strong tradition of religious and cultural tolerance, with at least some such principles enshrined in our Constitution. To what extent do you think culture war disagreements should be prominent in the national political discussion?

Chapter 3.1 – The News Business

1. Do you think the general public ever thinks about the business of media? If yes, what aspects of the business are they likely aware of? If no, how might they think about media? (E.g. simply as a fixture of existence, or as a place to seek occasional amusement, or etc.)
2. What are your principal news sources? Aside from the standard rationale of fulfilling your responsibility as a democratic citizen, what would you say are your primary reasons for keeping up with the news?
3. In the last thirty years, the quality of news has been decreasing, and the distinction between news and opinion is increasingly blurred. Where do you think the blame principally lies? For example, is it the shrinking profitability of the industry? Did it start on the right with Rush Limbaugh? Are the standards and ethics of journalists shrinking? Did Donald Trump play any role?
4. Given the information biases identified by Lance Bennett (personalized, dramatization, fragmentation, politics as game), how effective do you think the news is at educating democratic citizens? In what ways (if any) should it be doing better?
5. Is Andrey Mir too pessimistic when he says (1) polarization is now “baked into” our media system, and (2) journalism is dying out? What grounds are there for optimism; or, is there a possible pathway to reversing current trends?

Chapter 3.2 – Opinion and Propaganda

1. What do you think of Ellul’s perspective that people “need” propaganda to cope with the alienation and anxiety that comes along with a modern mass society? Is it even conceivable to eliminate this kind of propaganda if people demand it?
2. Using a more conventional meaning of propaganda as content/messaging designed to manipulate emotions... what is the nature of propaganda that comes from “the left”? How (if at all) does the left try to manipulate citizens into accepting its values? Is it different from what the right does?
3. What reasons are there that the public gets its ideas and information from the Political Media Complex rather than directly from Intellectuals? Is there another scheme that is both realistic and better. How could it be worked toward?
4. Is there anything ethically wrong with billionaire donors like the Kochs funding libertarian, business-friendly ideology in universities, think tanks, and political parties?
5. Having now thought about the flows of information and ideas in public discourse, how would you describe the mechanisms by which propaganda leads to political polarization?

Chapter 3.3 – Social Media and Freedom of Speech

1. How should we think about the differences between illegal government censorship and informal types of censorship (such as cancel mobs, political correctness, and social media moderation)?

2. What do you believe is the main purpose or benefit of protecting free speech? To achieve that purpose, is free speech protection alone sufficient? If not, what additionally is needed?
3. The First Amendment prohibits laws that “abridge” freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Does this mean that government may not do anything to improve the national speech “environment” if the environment has evolved in a destructive direction?
4. Should social media companies be compelled to carry all posted content that is not illegal? Or is additional moderation needed? More generally, are there any Constitutionally-legitimate regulations that should be imposed on social media companies’ moderation practices?
5. Some researchers are proposing or experimenting with technical changes to platforms aimed at reducing the levels of incivility on them. How much potential do you think these have for reducing the dominance of the more extreme and combative participants?

Chapter 4.1 – Bust Open the Silos

1. On occasions where you “poke your head into the opposing echo chamber”—whether a TV program or an online article—do you ever find yourself astonished by the tone and/or the talking points? To what extent do you think it is attributable its insular “stew of conformity,” that is, the consistent absence of conflicting viewpoints leading to the normalizing of extreme views?
2. When you are reading or watching news or political media that leans to your partisan side, how often do you think you would click on an OPPO button to see an opposing perspective? How frequently, on average, do you think other viewers would click on it?
3. Some partisans will regard the introduction of counterspeech into their own “space” as an indefensible intrusion, even if they themselves never click on the OPPO button. Are there sensible arguments why some political echo chambers ought to be regarded as sacrosanct? (For example, because it permits strong speech without the prospect of embarrassment; or because the Constitution does not support counterspeech for all situations.)

Chapter 4.2 – Citizen Education

1. To aid democratic discourse, is political news or citizen education more important? Why?
2. Why do you think the US spends so much less (per capita) on public media than do almost all other developed nations?
3. If online citizen education were to be greatly expanded, what topic(s) do you think should be highest priority? Why?

Chapter 4.3 – Public Discourse on Social Media

1. When it comes to posting on social media, how much effectiveness do you think teaching citizens about civility (and what used to be called “netiquette”) could be in bringing the temperature down?
2. What do you think is the greater polarization culprit on social media: disinformation (posting of information that is factually disprovable) or partisan rhetoric (use of partisan talking points to “score points”)? In general terms, what solutions would be most effective for addressing each of the two categories?
3. When partisans post on social media, to what extent do you believe they are conscious of (1) the polarizing effects of their language and (2) weaknesses in their arguments? How much more conscious of it are “elite” propagandists/pundits than are average citizens?

Chapter 4.4 – National Plebiscites

1. Schemes for “deliberative democracy” often require significant time commitments from participants, leading to questions about being able to “scale up.” In your view, how great of a problem is this? Is there a way to attract significantly more participants to these activities?
2. Besides the National Plebiscites approach, what other approaches might have success at drawing large number of average citizens into considering factual information about national issues?
3. Does our government have any business using taxpayer dollars to run programs that combine education, social media, and entertainment for the purposes of elevating democratic discourse? Why or why not?

Chapter 4.5 – Drastic Reform of the Fourth Estate

1. Arguments for the government funding media for public affairs generally rest on the demonstrated inability of for-profit media to adequately do the job. How strong do you find this kind of argument? For example, do you think what we currently get is “good enough”?
2. From a societal standpoint, how great of a loss would it be if fewer citizens paid attention to national political news when horse-race journalism, sensationalism, scandal, and so forth were largely eliminated?
3. How could we have assurance that the operation of publicly-funded media is impossible for partisan politicians to meddle with? What is a scenario where a US President could put their finger on the scale, that is, how might a President try to “get around” the barriers?

Chapter 4.6 – Ye Olde First Amendment

1. Given the description of the Democratic Discourse Amendment, to what extent do you feel like it could “eclipse” the First Amendment and undercut its authority? In what way(s) might it be undercut?

2. The Democratic Discourse Amendment, as drafted, uses fairly broad language. If you were asked to draft a much narrower amendment (i.e. providing Congress authority to pass laws abridging free speech only for very specific purposes), what is the most important, specific thing you would like to allow Congress to do? (Examples: regulating campaign finance; regulating social media.)

3. Amending the Constitution is unusual, especially in recent decades. Does the thought of doing it make you uneasy? In what way? What fear(s) do you have about it?

Chapter 4.7 – Penalizing Fraudulent Rhetoric

1. There have been terrible historical instances of government censorship—especially in authoritarian governments, but even (in a few instances) in the United States. But it is hard to defend public issuance of intentional, provable, harmful lies—except by Slippery Slope arguments that allowing one kind of censorship will lead to others. How slippery do you think that slope is (i.e. prohibiting intentional public lies leads to prohibiting other speech)? Why?

2. Do you think Donald Trump’s claim that the 2020 election was stolen was true? If not, do you think he should have been punished for issuing an important lie? Why or why not?

3. Truth, as many scholars have noted, is often relative. And thus, what is a lie to one person is sometimes a truth to another, and it is often extremely difficult to resolve the matter between them.

In areas such as politics and culture, is it even possible to devise criteria that everyone would accept for determining falsity? What does the burden of proof involve?