



WHY GROUPS GO TO EXTREMES

Cass R. Sunstein

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How does group behavior drive extremism and challenge democratic values? The answer lies in social dynamics—the ways people influence one another. In *Why Groups Go to Extremes* (AEI Press, September 2008), Harvard Law School professor Cass R. Sunstein outlines the causes and consequences of extremism driven by group dynamics. Groups ranging from citizens' forums to judicial panels tend to squelch diversity and polarize opinion, a phenomenon that may help account for the intensity and division of contemporary social and political debate. Indeed, the dangers of homogeneity and polarization within groups highlight a fundamental tension between the consequences of free speech and assembly and the value of intellectual diversity to civil society.

Conventional wisdom suggests that open discussion within groups will lead to compromise and moderation, but just the opposite often occurs. Sunstein draws on behavioral studies to conclude that “like-minded people tend, after discussions with one another, to end up thinking a more extreme version of what they thought before they started to talk.”

Why Groups Go to Extremes offers three compelling examples of the phenomenon of group polarization:

- Both liberals and conservatives end up with far more extreme views on affirmative action, same-sex civil unions, labor policy, and climate change after discussing the issues with similarly-minded individuals.
- Jurors favor more severe penalties in personal injury cases after talking with one another than when assessing penalties individually.
- Historically, Republican appointees on judicial panels make more conservative decisions when sitting with other Republican appointees, as opposed to when sitting with at least one Democratic appointee. Similarly, Democratic appointees are more liberal when they are members of all-Democratic panels than when sitting with at least one Republican appointee.

Sunstein proposes four explanations for this polarizing effect:

- The initial bias expressed by like-minded individuals feeds on itself, pushing the group further in the direction of the bias and extremism.
- Corroboration increases the confidence of group members who begin with less strongly held convictions, often producing extremism.
- Individuals move in the direction of what they perceive to be the popular view within the group.
- The Internet may increase the risk of extremism by facilitating contact among like-minded people at the expense of more diverse connections.

Sunstein argues that the key to preventing the spread of extremist views is not to suppress deliberation among the like-minded; such groups productively challenge thinking and majority opinion. Instead, policymakers should develop institutions to ensure that like-minded groups encounter a diversity of opinions within civil society. The goal, Sunstein contends, must be “to create spaces for enclave deliberation without insulating enclave members from those with opposing views, and without insulating those outside of the enclave from the views of those within it.”

Why Groups Go to Extremes was originally presented as the AEI Center for Regulatory and Market Studies 2007 Distinguished Lecture.

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