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Brigham Young

THE POLITICAL REVIEW



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Dear readers,

Each week, regardless of the topic of our discussion, our staff has managed to turn to the topic of partisan political conversations - and why they're so important. While the media often inundates us with relentless negativity, I remain steadfast in my conviction that we have much more in common with each other than we are led to believe. Although our staff is spread throughout the political spectrum, our diversity allows us to discover points of agreement in unexpected places. Each week, we learn to connect with the person behind the party. I often reflect on John Donne's poem, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

We cannot and do not exist in isolation. Our shared human heritage connects us all - as Donne cries, each person's death diminishes me. I can't help but lean into the natural contrast; each person's life must amplify me.

Our class discussions leave an indelible impact, reinforcing my faith in our collective ability as individuals, as students, as a BYU community, to learn to disagree better. I'm convinced that through genuine attempts at understanding, we can find deeper consensus and make more room in our hearts to love those who are different from us. In our own personal pursuits of enlightenment, we're bound to encounter obstacles. There's nothing quite like thoughtful, late-night conversations with those who we trust and respect to help us find clarity and cultivate our own beliefs.

So this October, I encourage you to go and listen - not to respond, but to learn - to someone you typically disagree with; perhaps you'll find that you agree more than you think. Let's remember that kindness, not contention should drive our interactions with others. To make Donne's words my own... "For I, and you, and all of us, are involved in humankind."

Happy reading,

MEGAN BAIRD
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The BYU Political Review is a student publication of BYUPAS and the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies.



“For Whom the Bell Tolls”

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.

Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.

As well as if a promontory were.

As well as if a manor of thine own
Or of thine friend’s were.

Each man’s death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.

Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

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“It is a Bad Plan That Admits of No Modification”

BY ABISH FATANI

Every four years I sit on the edge of my seat looking at multiple blue and red maps of the United States, eagerly anticipating the results of our presidential election. Due to the heightened political landscape we have seen in the last few months I was already anticipating that the next election will be especially tense. I did not realize how tense until I saw the details of Project 2025, a plan published by the Heritage Foundation for the potential transfer of the White House if the GOP wins in 2024.

The Heritage Foundation is a political think tank based in Washington, DC. It was founded during the Nixon presidency and many of its policies and recommendations were implemented by Reagan. Depending on which side of the isle you fall, this is either a green or red flag. The Heritage Foundation has created a plan for Republicans if they win the White House. This presidential transition project has four prongs: policy, personnel, training, and playbook. Together, each tenet aims to “rescue the country from the grip of the radical Left” by instating “both a governing agenda and the right people in place, ready to carry this agenda out on day one of the next conservative administration.” The policy section gives specific recommendations that will restructure and overhaul all federal agencies from the intelligence departments, to the Department of Education. The personnel section essentially creates a conservative LinkedIn that can be pulled from when they fire current people from federal agencies that do not meet conservative standards. The training section gives new personnel training on what the POTUS and the GOP wants from them and how to effectively carry out what is asked. The playbook lays out how the GOP will implement the changes in 180 days from the inauguration of a conservative president. I highly recommend you read about the plan from the Project 2025 website itself to create your own conclusions about the scope and effect of this plan if it were to be implemented. There have been many strong reactions to this plan as it heavily strips power from those with opposing views, de-funds many public goods people care about, and raises many other questions and concerns. The AP befittingly called it an “at-tempt to dismantle the US government.” Politico calls out how the plan schemes to dismantle the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Energy.

Complete transparency: I am extremely against this plan. That is why I encourage you to read it yourself so you can create your own opinion. The plan will strip all federal powers of any diversity of thought. I believe it is important to recognize and give weight to opinions different from my own and to talk about them with good faith. This plan completely strips power from any non-conservative view on topics like school curriculum, military budget, environmental protections, how media agencies are handled, the housing that is prioritized, and the budget allotted to veterans. The plan strips the opportunity for many important government tasks to be handled in a way that represents the people and rather it will only be handled in a way that represents people who cannot handle healthy debates or opposition. Not only does the plan stealthily escape any chance of opposition or repercussion, it is also alarming that many conservatives see it as their best option. It speaks to a highly prevalent delusion among many on the right that believe there is some looming doomsday that will be wrought by the left. The imagined persecution is bleeding through with every policy recommendation, every training, and every re-cruited personnel. The narrative that warrants such gross destabilizing of federal powers is highly fictitious and often counterproductive to addressing the issues that affect Americans. Due to the plan’s egregious violations of democracy, diversity, and balance, I highly doubt that we will see the implementation of the plan, but I do believe it speaks to the state of the GOP to consider a truly un-American plan riddled with such bigotry, dullness, and divisiveness. Stripping federal powers of diversity of thought and political standing does not align with the founding principle of the United States. Engaging in political discourse to better understand those with different views, better understand your own views, and better our country is a large part of how this country and its constitution was born. Diversity of thought is how we are able to progress as people, as a country and as a human race. For many Americans, much is riding on this upcoming election. You must start thinking now about the box you fill on November 5, 2024, as the preservation of diversity of thought and all its many fruits are on the line.

“Us vs Them”

(Assessing the Climate Crisis)

BY BRENDAN ARMSTRONG

It's no secret that climate change poses an imminent threat to life as we know it. [1] After all, we learn about in the news, in class-room settings, when we look at the polluted sky in Utah Valley, and over casual dinner conversations with our roommates. It's normal to talk about now, despite one's political affiliation. But if you're anything like me, then you're probably wondering - shouldn't we be freaking out more than we already are? After all, the oceans are warming, forest fires are drastically becoming more common, and we're using up available drinking water like there's no tomorrow. So then if it's such a big threat, should I not be doing more?

Before diving into that, to put it into perspective for you, the current warming of the planet is happening at a rate not seen in the past 10,000 years. While yes, changes in global temperature are normal (in the past 800,000 years there have been eight ice ages and warm periods), what we are seeing today is anything but typical. The patterns we currently observe haven't been seen in the past millennia; the amount of carbon dioxide contained in atmospheric gasses is higher than it has ever been [1]. And because of that, we are seeing shrinking ice sheets, rising sea levels, and an increased frequency of natural disasters. While one may not understand the immediate impact of those consequences, the international order (at least seemingly) understands just how big of a threat they pose.

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) finds that reducing greenhouse gas emissions requires significant changes on the part of individual nations. Examples of doing so include lowering fossil fuel usage, the deployment of low-emission energy sources, conserving energy, and switching to alternative energy carriers [2]. While this is easier said than done, applying pressure on high energy countries (particularly China, the US, India, Russia, and Japan) will hopefully begin to alleviate the damaging impacts of their climate policies.

And with the current rate at which carbon emissions are being produced, I don't think nations could go on much longer without actively applying corrective policies.

With that being said, Pew Research Center finds that “a majority of Americans support prioritizing the development of renewable energy sources” [3]. America is the second largest carbon emitter and thus, we have one of the largest responsibilities to combat the realities of climate change. According to the White House National Climate Task Force, we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions 50-52% below 2005 levels by 2030 and achieve a net-zero emission economy by 2050 [4]. Depending on the administration in charge, this certainly can become a reality and hopefully will.

I hope it's evident up to this point just how big of a threat climate change poses. However, as BYU students living in Provo, UT, we likely won't prevent climate catastrophes simply by choosing to use re-usable grocery bags at the store or walking to campus instead of driving. In comparison to the climate emissions produced by large corporations and governments, our individual impact is almost negligible [5]. But I don't think that means we ought to stop doing those small and simple things. Change comes little by little. Whether that be from a university deciding to up its “recycle game” or from a student choosing to take the bus to work instead of driving, collective efforts to combat climate change will not go completely unnoticed. So then my answers to the questions raised initially are that yes, we should do more, but no, we shouldn't freak out. There is strength in numbers and there is power in creating a better culture about caring for the environment. It is my opinion that upward pressure from individuals, when combined together, can be the greatest cause for change.

“Is fear about AI Justified?”

BY CALEB JOHNSTON

An aspiring dentist, I wanted to know if my career would still be viable further down the road or if the profession would become obsolete due to advancing technology. A quick Google search indicated that “Our visitors have voted that there is a small chance this occupation will be replaced.” [1] Feeling somewhat assured, the irony of the situation struck me soon afterwards: I had just asked a machine if a machine would replace my job.

Triviality aside, the idea of replacing menial work with machines may excite business leaders. Employees also see it as a way to help them manage their workload. On the other side, employees also fear that AI threatens their job security—a Microsoft survey revealed that 49% of employees fear AI stealing their jobs [2]. To take it a step further, some are concerned that AI won’t just replace jobs, it will threaten humanity. Even the godfather of AI, George Hinton, has expressed concern about the potential of the technology [3]. Such threats have induced calls for a pause to AI development. As a human, not a computer, I admit to planning for my future with technological development in mind. Though AI should force us to adapt and maybe change our plans, the fear regarding its development is exaggerated.

Admittedly, the technology can be stunning, as anyone who has seen ChatGPT can attest to. But its novelty seems to conceal AI’s recent shortcomings. Consider one form of artificial intelligence: self-driving car. In 2014, Elon Musk claimed that a car capable of driving itself 90% of the time would probably be available in 2015 [4]. Just three months ago, he predicted that Tesla would have a Chat-GPT moment, in which self-driving cars would explode in the next year or two with three million cars driving themselves [5]. As of February 2022, \$200 billion had been invested in self-driving technology worldwide [6]. The development of self-driving cars has proven difficult, given the number of different situations an autonomous vehicle could confront [7]. Nine years after Musk’s original prediction, autonomous vehicles haven’t made a dent in the car industry. If a robot still can’t drive a car, do we really expect it to overcome humanity anytime soon?

Even if robots don’t take over the world, they could still threaten jobs. New technology could very well change the job landscape, but that is something we have seen before. Kenneth Rogoff, an economist at Harvard University, stated, “Since the dawn of the industrial age, a recurrent fear has been that technological change will spawn mass unemployment. Neoclassical economists predicted that this would not happen, because people would find other jobs, albeit possibly after a long period of painful adjustment.

By and large, that prediction has proven to be correct.” [8] In other words, with the development of new technology, we have found new ways to work. Such adaptation can be facilitated by slow application, which appears to be the case with artificial intelligence. A recent article from *The Economist* predicted that the “road to wide-spread (AI) diffusion, and any resulting productivity boom, will be a long one.” A third of small businesses have no plans to implement AI in the next year, and around 70 S&P 500 companies have not interest in AI [9]. While slow productivity growth is disappointing, a long diffusion period opens the opportunity for job adaptation. Fortunately, our government has not inserted itself into the job adaptation question. So far, efforts are appropriately focused on protection by way of transparency and prevention of discrimination rather than protection from job loss [10]. The White House’s “Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights” doesn’t make a single mention of jobs [11]. This omission is suitable, especially because we don’t know how jobs will adapt and how quickly. Rapid implementation of AI would justify an individual’s or a government’s fear of AI, but so far, the sensational changes seem to be underwhelming.

Admittedly, just as Rogoff suggested, there will be pain in technological development. Workers may not want to adapt to keep working. James Suzman, author of *Work* [12], predicts that income inequality will be exacerbated. In my mind, one of the worst outcomes from the development of AI would be to antiquate human creativity. While AI may yield a creative product that is just as good, the value is in the journey. Consider writing, a process that requires organization thinking and synthesizing of ideas, thinking that doesn’t happen if a machine does it for you. These are real risks, but at risk of being too trite, the simple cliché “no pain, no gain” aptly describes this step of technological progress.

Early on, the AI narrative was dominated by a dichotomy between fear and excitement. Fortunately, a more conservative narrative has emerged: AI still needs human revision, and new technology is difficult to implement. We would be wise to remember the limitations of new technologies and to be skeptical of outlandish predictions regarding the implementation of AI. As I’ve witnessed other people behold the marvel of ChatGPT, admiration has been directed towards the machine. While watching a chat-bot spit out coherent, creative English is breath-taking, the real miracle is that humans were able to create such a machine. Whatever the future holds for AI, let’s remember that any technological progress truly is a mark of human progress rather than a precursor to human extinction.

“College Football and..”

BY ISABEL HALLOWS

What do you think of when you hear University of Alabama? Many Americans will first think: *football, Roll Tide, Coach Nick Saban*. What about Gonzaga? One’s mind probably turns to basketball; their only exposure to the “Zags” may be March Madness. What is less commonly known is that University of Alabama has achieved R1 status of Doctoral Universities, with very high research activity, or that Gonzaga’s School of Engineering and Applied Sciences Program is top 10% in the nation. While college sports are closely followed, supported and funded, these academic metrics often remain unknown and overlooked. But isn’t the purpose of university to gain education and prepare for professional pursuits and lifelong careers?

For many prestigious academic institutions, like BYU, the objective of sports is not directly in harmony with the principal objectives of the institution. Brigham Young said, “Our education should be such as to improve our minds and fit us for increased usefulness; to make us of greater service to the human family,” a longform version of the heart of BYU’s purpose and motto: Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve. Sports—particularly football—often place the most value on winning, dominating, and realizing professional athletic career aspirations. These principles seem to be in stark contrast to the core purpose of the University, which begs the question how does football fulfill the university’s mission of “going forth to serve”? At BYU, I think the football program exists in part to help the university and by extension the Church to “go forth” into the world. Our students and faculty can fill the pages of academic journals with their research, our weekly devotionals can be published on a podcast for anyone to listen to, and our choir and bands can perform for audiences across the world. But who reads published research, listens to devotionals, or regularly attends piano recitals? Not the masses. The average American hears of BYU on Saturdays in the fall, because the nation has its eyes on college football. Puka Nacua and Zach Wilson, through college football, have helped make BYU a household name in more homes than just Latter-day Saints’.

College football is also an extension of a consumerist society. Accordingly, another role BYU football plays is one of profit. Sports have a unique power to create an environment that is entertaining and appealing to all demographics: athletic fanatics, alumni, people seeking an invigorating social scene, and everything in between. This broad inclusivity gives college athletics a special capacity to draw out the money. In 2021, the college football industry yielded \$1.6 billion in revenue—evidence that the masses don’t shy away from the price tag that comes with the experience, the community and the prestige.

This mentality is perpetuated in universities across the country, not just in Provo. Institutions of higher learning are still businesses. They need a) funding and b) publicity. Athletics provide an avenue through which universities can make money—through revenue and donations—and make a name, as living room televisions around the country show replays of Chase Roberts’ one-handed snag in the endzone while the iconic stretch Y glistens proudly on his helmet. Further, sports inspire loyalty. Think about BYU alums; loyal, strong and true and bleed-ing blue as long as they’re well enough to say, “GO COUGARS!” They have a degree and a career, so they aren’t on campus anymore but they want to stay involved. What do they do? They go to a football game, watch the cougars play on television, buy the swag, and donate to the university to give back and support something they love so dearly. In building prestigious and successful sports programs, universities are also building a fan base, and that fan base is what generates revenue and brings money to the schools. While at face value college football may seem to compromise the standard and principles of an institution, I feel that football is a fun and unifying way to rally support for the institutions that shape the upcoming professionals—and shape our future. So next time you see a lifelong Cougar fan attending a game with their kids, shouting the Ra Ra Ra’s at the end of the fight song, splitting a Cougar Tail with the next generation, think about their impact. In stadiums across the nation, these are the kinds of experiences, provided for by the programs of college athletics, that pave the path for academic institutions to garner support and create a community in the process.

“Red, White, and Blonde”

(How Taylor Swift and Dolly Parton Bridge the Political Divide)

BY JANE DRINKWATER

When it comes to politics, Americans are increasingly polarized: data suggests that we’re finding less to agree on and getting angrier in our disagreements [1]. This political divide is also bleeding into the rest of our society, thanks to our reliance on sociocultural cues to define political positions. Open TikTok, for example, and you’ll find a host of tips for sussing out someone’s politics based on attributes that are non-partisan at face value. He drives an F-150? Probably voted for Trump. She shops at Trader Joe’s? Progressive.

Thus, as political division deepens, we start to find ourselves with a greater cultural division, where the two parties are associated with separate grocery stores, hobbies, or musical genres. Of course, categorizing pop culture along partisan lines leads to inaccurate, harmful, and divisive stereotypes. Still, I think it allows for some interesting evaluations. For example, what do Americans’ shared cultural preferences reveal about the political issues we agree on? My mind jumps first to two of America’s greatest (and blondest) icons: Dolly Parton and Taylor Swift.

Both women play a massive role in American pop culture: Taylor’s Eras tour was so wildly popular that it’s estimated to have boosted the US economy by \$5 billion [2]; Dolly’s career has spanned decades, produced dozens of hits, and even been the subject of a whole BYU class.

The American music scene they work in isn’t necessarily new to politicization. Hip-hop, for example, has been identified with black and urban issues since its inception, while folk music has been a vehicle for pacifist, environmentalist messages since at least the 1960s [3]. Dolly and Taylor both began their careers as country singers, which is stereotypically Republican, and then crossed over to more liberal pop music. What allows them to successfully inhabit both spaces?

It’s easy to see how she might appeal to a left-leaning audience, especially in recent years. Her music has become increasingly feminist and supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, and after facing criticism for her silence in 2016, she has become more vocal in her opposition to Donald Trump. Yet her brand of social liberalism is watery enough that it only alienates the farthest right Republicans. Her frequent references to traditional American culture combined with her beginnings as the flirty, inoffensive teenage darling of country music also endear her to the conservative crowd.

The numbers suggest that, as expected, Taylor Swift has a bipartisan audience. 55% of her fans identify as Democrats, with the other 45% split evenly between Republicans and Independents [4]. While it’s not an even split, it’s fairly representative when you consider that most of her listeners are under 40, a demographic dominated by Democrats [5].

Dolly represents both ends of the spectrum in even more dramatic ways. She fits right into the working-class Republican base: she is a white woman in her 70s, was raised in poverty-stricken rural Tennessee, and speaks frequently about her Christian faith. Yet the left adores her for her early support of the LGBTQ+ community. Dolly’s iconically high-femme look is regularly impersonated by drag queens, and she often jokes that she herself would be a drag queen if she weren’t a woman [6]. Americans who are liberal on social issues may also appreciate Dolly as an empowered woman from a patriarchy-dominated era. Those who lean liberal on economic issues can get behind her working-class anthem “9 to 5” (which I was first introduced to when Elizabeth Warren used it—without Dolly’s permission—on the campaign trail) [7].

They also both rely heavily on popular, non-partisan positions. They sing about the American way of life and own their national heritage with a sort of non-partisan patriotism. Though she never addresses specific policies, Dolly has released a song about her frustration with government corruption, which both parties claim they’re working to end. Taylor frequently sings empowering lyrics, with simple messages about kindness or resilience that are vague enough to apply to anyone.

This is not to say that the singers are immune to criticism. Taylor has been criticized by the left for environmentally costly habits. The right has questioned whether Dolly’s child literacy charity is sending kids age-appropriate and politically appropriate books. Throughout their careers, both women have faced pushback for not taking more political stands. The Taylor/Dolly model for bridging the political divide may also seem challenging to replicate. Is it only possible for straight, white, conventionally attractive women? Does bipartisan support depend on sharing their specific opinions?

I hope that the answer is no. I am optimistic that even Americans whose identities, circumstances, or politics don’t exactly mirror Taylor or Dolly can still find common ground with a majority of the country. There are likely many other ways to resonate with people across the aisle, but Taylor and Dolly’s model shows that the feat is possible—and at the very least, we can all agree to enjoy good music.

“In the World and Of the World: ¹¹ A Case for Global Citizenship”

BY KATELYN GALE

Growing up, one of the most common phrases I heard from my parents, friends, and church

leaders was this: “Remember, be in the world, but not of the world.” This phrase, eventually becoming a mantra of mine, resonated with me deeply. It allowed me to separate myself from my peers and maintain a heightened sense of spirituality. Each time I saw or experienced something I did not like, I reminded myself: be in the world, but not of the world.

Eventually, however, I began to find myself apathetic to the experiences of others. In the same way that I distanced myself from ‘worldly’ attitudes and sentiments, I similarly distanced myself from global issues and affairs. I used this mantra as a shelter that unintentionally shielded me from the experiences and cultures of others, rather than the worldly attitudes I was trying so hard to avoid. In the end, with the world becoming increasingly politically polarized, I realized that there was no need to isolate myself from the world, its vast cultures, or its political affairs. Thus, beyond the effects of worldly attitudes, increased political polarization throughout the world necessitates our step into the world, and in doing so, our step into global citizenship.

So, why should we care about global citizenship, the understanding and appreciation of the world as a conglomerate of distinct, rich cultures, peoples, and countries? Given the United State’s geographical isolation from other major G20 countries, and the fact that many people in Europe can travel by train and cross 4 or 5 countries in less than 24 hours, whereas people in the United States can drive for 24 hours and barely cross over to Canada, it is admittedly very easy to lose track of and interest in global affairs and cultures [1]. Just last week, one of my well-traveled professors surprised me by beginning a sentence with “if you guys are ever in Prague...” and proceeding to discuss events from Prague’s history that continue to intersect with the United States and the rest of the world today. Despite the United State’s relative geographical isolation from the rest of the world, knowledge and appreciation of global affairs and cultures promotes the inclusion, rather than isolation, of individuals throughout the world.

And inclusion here does matter. According to a recent Brown University study, political polarization, the departure from central to extreme political attitudes, has increased more rapidly in the United States than in other major democratic countries since 1970 [2]. More and more people in the United States and other democratic countries increasingly view members of different political parties and groups as less favorable, creating an “us versus them mindset” that only furthers the divide between the two groups [3]. With the United States specifically, political polarization divides different ethnic groups and posits a great cultural and political struggle between them, one that is deeply-rooted and dates back to the 1960s [4]. While political polarization is certainly not specific to the United States alone, it does pose a threat to our interpersonal communication with others—encouraging the exclusion of individuals and groups, only furthering the cultural and political divide.

But this does not mean that the deeply-rooted political polarization within the United States cannot be assuaged. In fact, many organizations, such as Braver Angels and Living Room Conversations, devote extensive resources toward facilitating communication between members of divided groups [5][6]. But even beyond these organizational efforts, working to decrease political polarization and increase inclusion of others compels our individual participation and step into global citizenship.

So what could our individual global citizenship look like? Acknowledging others’ roles and places in the world and the infinite potential to interact and forge meaningful relationships with people of different cultures, ethnicities, and creeds than us. Understanding and accepting that everyone has different experiences in and views of the world and furthermore extending grace to those who hold different opinions than us. Recognizing that global affairs and foreign politics, while seemingly not relevant to our day to day lives, does impact us in an important and meaningful way. And ultimately, knowing that above everything else, beyond cultural, political, or ethnic divides, we all take part in a unique human experience in a unique time in which our actions now will determine the state of political polarization and inclusion within the United States and other countries for years to come.

In stepping out of our isolation from the world, we can begin to embrace others and build the bridges that will ultimately serve to mend the divide between groups.

And so, in my ongoing quest to step into the world and into global citizenship, I remind myself daily: “Remember, be in the world, *and of the world.*”

“Affirmation”

BY LEVI HILTON

There is an epidemic in this country. Poor mental health affects millions of Americans every single day. In many cases, the effects can be long lasting, spiritually, emotionally, financially, and even physically.

In this essay, I'd like to direct the attention to a specific group of people deeply involved in this epidemic – those with gender dysphoria.

To quote an essay I published last year:

“The transgender population in America is under attack. You are more likely to die as part of the transgender community than as an active duty military personnel [1]. That's not due to murder, but due to suicide. According to a recent study by UCLA [2], 40% of transgender individuals have attempted suicide. Depending on the situation, between 70-93.8% of transgender individuals have seriously thought about suicide [3]. The transgender community is 600% more likely to develop mental disorders, 300% more likely to be prescribed antidepressants, and 600% more likely to be hospitalized for attempted suicide.” [4]

Why is this the case? Some have postulated that this identity has existed historically, but because of social pressure, people were never open about it. However, this doesn't make sense for two reasons. (1) If that were the case we would see increased suicide historically, but we don't. (2) Far more Gen Z adults claim membership to the LGBTQ community than previous generations, even now when it is accepted and celebrated.

Might there be another variable that is causing the difference? In a study published by the National Library of Medicine the author wrote, “Deterioration in mental health is one of the side effects stemming from social media overuse.” [5] It seems that the dramatic increase in technology, especially social media, by Gen Z, may be one of the causes of this mental health crisis. Since members of the transgender community are 6x more likely to develop mental health disorders, there could be a connection.

Clearly, this is a group that needs our attention. These statistics are staggering. No matter your political ideology, we should all agree that something needs to be done. Not only is the transgender community the most at risk group in America, it is also incredibly fast growing—especially among young people. A 2022 Gallup poll shows that since 2012 the percentage of U.S. adults that identify as part of the LGBTQ community has doubled [6]. They draw a connection to the recent increases by stating, “This [increase] is occurring as more of Gen Z is reaching adulthood.” [7]

Regardless of the contributing factors giving rise to gender dysphoria in youth, let's talk about solutions. How can we protect this at-risk demographic?

What have we tried? Affirmation. There is one school of thought that the reason for increased suicide risk among the transgender community is due to bullying, lack of community understanding, feelings of rejection, and overall lack of acceptance. That is why gender affirmation is commonly thought to be a way to help this group. While these feelings may be damaging, studies are inconclusive that gender affirmation deflates the attempted suicide rates. In a study from UCLA on transgender suicide, they found a correlation between steps in the transitioning process and suicide thoughts and attempts. See below. [8] (see graphs in online version)

I will concede that this study relies on data from 2015. It is outdated. This being said, I think more research like this would be beneficial in helping the LGBTQ community be safer and happier.

I once heard an argument against gender affirmation that went like this: gender dysphoria affects mental health. We should treat it like other mental health disorders. Imagine someone who is physically healthy suffers from anorexia, we'll call them Sadie. If Sadie approaches a doctor or a pier and tells them that she believes she is overweight and should forgo meals, what will the doctor or pier say? Obviously they would help Sadie receive treatment and remain healthy. Can you imagine if the doctor told Sadie something like, “I'm glad you're recognizing this about yourself, we will give you treatment to help you relate physically to the way you identify yourself.” This would be unacceptable.

Do you see the metaphorical connection here? If we treated gender dysphoria like a mental health condition, then affirmation would not be the best approach for long term benefit. In fact, if we DID treat gender dysphoria like a mental health condition, then we would find solutions to dissipate feelings of incongruence with sex. We'd help individuals overcome the dangerous side effects that gender dysphoria brings.

Even if affirmation is having a slight effect on suicide rates, which it doesn't appear to, this is not a long term or effective solution. I have felt the sorrows of transgender suicide personally. We must do better. The suicide rates in the LGBTQ community are incredibly high. That fact hasn't changed over the last decade. What we are doing is not working. Gender affirmation care isn't providing the results we hoped for. Let's rethink solutions.

“Step Aside Old Politicians. It's Time for a New Generation to Lead America”

(Featuring an interview with 24-year-old Provo City Council Candidate, Tanner Bennett)

BY NATHAN CHASE

Americans are seriously concerned about the age and cognitive ability of their many politicians. President Biden, who is 80 years old, has had multiple public stumbles and gaffes that have hindered his presidency and overshadowed his legislative accomplishments. During recent press conferences, 81-year-old Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell froze and remained unresponsive as stunned reporters watched. Dianne Feinstein, 90, has been hospitalized multiple times for brain inflammation [1]. It is time for politicians above the age of 65 to serve out their existing terms and hand over leadership to younger generations.

How did America wind up with leaders who need to make decisions on artificial intelligence, yet they cannot operate a smartphone? How do we have politicians who cannot formulate a proper sentence at a time when U.S. ties with world powers such as China and Russia are deteriorating? With all due respect, we recognize the contributions many of these politicians have made to the country. However, these cognitive lapses are dangerous and send the wrong signal about the country around the world.

Although some millennial and Gen Z representatives have been elected to Congress in recent election cycles, there is still more work to be done. The Senate's average age is 65.3 years [2]. Individuals on both sides of the aisle agree that younger individuals with new and fresh ideas must come to support the country in these times of severe divisiveness.

On November 4th, Provo will be voting for a new city council [3]. Tanner Bennett, a 24-year-old BYU student, ran a grassroots campaign to be a member of the city council while studying, working two jobs, and caring for his wife. Tanner, impressively, refused all donations in favor of having contributors give to the community [4]. Tanner Bennett garnered over 1500 votes, and while he fell just short of advancing to the final election, his campaign left an impression on the community.

Q: What made you want to run for Provo City council?

A: “The primary reason I decided to run was that nobody else was. Back in June, my wife mentioned that the candidate filing period was closing. I was looking at the candidates and felt so uninspired. I doubted that any of them knew what was going on in students' lives and what young people are dealing with in this area. Having now run the campaign, I know I was correct. It was a big deal to have somebody run for office that connected so well with the young people of Provo.”

“What we are seeing is this trend towards gerontocracy in the United States. We have people that have been holding on to power for decades. 80 or 90 year old people are no longer the demographic we can rely on to make the decisions about the future. Really where it starts is at the city level. The issues we care about as students such as parking, rent, housing quality, the things that impact us the most come from the city level. [My campaign] was inspired by the idea that young people need to be running and trying to get their voice out there. My voice was supported by students and young people that finally felt they could relate to someone who was running for office— perhaps for the first time in their lives. Even though it wasn't a win, I see it overall as a net positive for us and our community.”

Q: What is your view on the current state of government?

A: “The government has its parts that are functional. There are people that work well together, but ultimately we are moving towards exponential polarization. It has spiraled us into tribalism and nationalism that is extremely dangerous. I did not run as a Republican or Democrat, I ran as a moderate Independent because our city and country needs more moderation instead of spinning further from each other to the point that nothing gets done. People are not emphasizing policy— rather, they are emphasizing emotion and ideology and they're highlighting problems without providing solutions.”

Q: A lot of young people get discouraged when looking at all that is happening around us and feel like it's easier to block it out. What role should young people play in politics?

A: “It is in our greatest interest to be more involved. The reason we have 70, 80, 90 year olds in the government is because we do not have the time and resources to invest into politics because we are all so concerned with making our ends meet. You look around the city we live in, 33% of us are at or below the poverty line. No one in the younger demographic who are working and trying to find a way to pay rent or food do not have the bandwidth to think about running for office. As someone who ran a campaign working two jobs with a very sick wife, taking classes, doing research, I wanted to show that this does not need to be a great time commitment. We can make a difference and that is what we did. Even without winning, we were able to contribute \$15,000 and hundreds of hours of community service to care and food bank organizations. We did so much good despite volunteers having so much going on.

Q: What is next for you now that the primary election is over?

A: “Quite a few of our social media videos have gone viral and we have used that momentum to start the Renters Advocacy Network or “RAN”. I intend for it to be a lobbying group for students and young people's rights in Provo. We are taking on parking enforcement, landlords, and low wages. We have made the network with the intent to make measurable strides in these areas and a statewide bill to combat predatory towing and booting throughout the state level. Ultimately, what I hope people realize through our efforts is that we have power when we work together, and to inspire people in our demographic to become more civically engaged.”

Young people must take action by having open and honest talks with each other, exercising our voting rights for good, and paying attention to local politics. Our unique tools such as social media allow us to spend little to no time or money while still making a difference. Commitment in time and money to really make a difference. As the 2024 election approaches, we must be active citizens if we really want change at the top of government.

“Re-Evaluating Social Contract Theory”

BY CALEB RINGGER

Dozens of controversial political issues divide Americans today. Most of these pose important questions about the role and composition of the government—Who should the next president be? How much should the government tax its citizens? What should the government do to prevent gun violence? The answers to these questions are undoubtedly important. But in my view, none of these questions are as important as answering the most fundamental question in politics—why does the government exist in the first place?

Social contract theory, as advanced by a diverse array of philosophers including Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant, tries to answer this question by arguing that government exists because the people of a given nation voluntarily surrender a portion of their natural freedoms in exchange for extra protection that the government provides.[1] As its name might imply, the relationship between citizens and their government acts as a contract—the government gives us protection and some degree of added well-being, and in exchange we promise to obey the laws they pass. This theory seems logical enough, and it’s certainly popular. But unfortunately, it has significant weaknesses that weaken its ability to provide a coherent theoretical justification for the existence of government.

The basic idea at the core of social contract theory—that the relationship between a government and its citizens is analogous to a contract—is fundamentally flawed. First, as the first day of any contract law class would teach you, a legally binding contract is one that is entered into voluntarily by two informed, consenting parties, one of which extends an offer that the other accepts.

It should be obvious to everyone reading this, or at least every naturally-born citizen of the United States, that you have never participated in such an exchange with the government. The government never came to my front door, or my hospital room when I was an infant, and asked for my consent to submit to their laws in exchange for whatever protection they offered. Therefore, the claim that our relationship is analogous to that of a contract is seriously dubious. Some social contract theorists address this problem by arguing that citizens give “implicit” or “hypothetical” consent when they take advantage of the protections the government provides. Are we really comfortable with that idea? Apply it to other areas of life where consent is important. Do we really think “hypothetical consent” is as valid as explicit consent?

The analogy is further problematic because of another basic concept of contract law—breach of contract.

The idea is that when one side of a contract fails to fulfill their obligations, the other party can take action against them and be awarded damages and/or terminate the contract altogether.

While there are some limited ways for citizens to take action against government abuses, there is, of course, no lawful way for citizens to “terminate” the social contract, something that would undoubtedly involve rebellion. We might be comfortable with this idea when we consider rebellions against tyrannical governments, like the American Revolution. But the exact same reasoning was explicitly used by the Confederate States to justify their secession.[2]

Let me be perfectly clear—I’m not arguing that the government is illegitimate, or that a government that more strictly followed the principles of contract law would be better than our current government. However, I am suggesting that social contract theory is an inadequate theoretical basis for justifying the relationship of the government to its citizens.

But if that’s true, where do we go from here? Discarding social contract theory feels like pulling the rug out from under our entire idea of government. After all, the Founding Fathers proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence that governments “derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.”[3]

I don’t have an easy or comprehensive answer to that question. However, I lean towards an idea I’ll call the moral justification approach. Society with a government is objectively better than society without government, almost no matter how ineffective or corrupt that government might be. For that reason, government has a moral justification to exist and perpetuate its existence even without the explicit consent of the governed. However, if the government becomes so abusive, or so grossly inept at providing even basic protections, then society can justifiably argue that they would be better off with no government at all. Situations like this, when the government is rampantly abusing basic human rights, justify revolutions that aim to either permanently abolish the government or, more realistically, replace it with a better one.

To a certain extent, my description remains vague. I won’t pretend to be able to prescribe specific criteria for every potential issue that could arise from the moral justification approach. But I do think it’s important to have a coherent ideological justification for the “Leviathan” that is our government—a supreme authority with a monopoly on violence that demands you surrender some of your liberties and property in exchange for protection. Social contract theory does not provide that justification.

“The Clock Struck 13: Regulating AI before it’s too Late”

BY JACOB LEAVITT

When considering humanity’s future with the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), most people imagine a dystopia where machine overlords reduce humans—by force or by economics—into oblivion. This fear is unfounded. There are genuine concerns we should have regarding AI but these are more procedural than theatrical. AI users, policy makers, and AI researchers should focus their efforts on helping AI overcome issues of transparency, fairness, and accountability through practical legislation that promotes innovation, protects privacy, and ensures AI development is ethical.

Transparency

There exists a natural tension between AI researchers and AI consumers. Researchers and companies want to keep the data and processes used to develop new systems proprietary to protect their intellectual property and to defend against public retaliation for questionable practices. Consumers and ethics demands that development processes are transparent to protect against malpractice. Furthermore, consumers have a fundamental right to understand how the technology they use works. When specific, well-considered guidelines are made and policed, companies act appropriately and their interests can be protected, encouraging further innovation. If AI companies subjected themselves to external, confidential peer-review data auditing they could limit access to their trade secrets while maintaining greater industry safeguards. Information regarding the AI development process also needs to be made publicly available. As people have a greater understanding of AI, it will become a more powerful, ethical, and safe tool.

Fairness

In this context, fairness refers to ensuring that the decisions made by AI systems do not discriminate against certain individuals or groups based on immutable factors such as race, gender, or socioeconomic status. The AI training process requires terabytes of data, hours of computing time, and a rigorous training model. This data may contain entries from 20 to 50 years ago. If this data provided to the AI demonstrates bias against a group of people and the training model isn’t well-designed, the AI will replicate that bias. As AI has become increasingly important in making decisions in critical yet sensitive areas like employment, lending, education, housing, healthcare, and criminal justice, potential unfairness could be crippling to progress. For example, an AI system used to screen job applicants may unintentionally discriminate against women if it is trained to replicate historical data that reflects gender biases in hiring decisions. Today if someone applies to a large company or university it is almost certain their application will be screened by a bot trained on old data making this problem increasingly prevalent.

There are many ways to manage unfairness in an AI program. For example, developers can use data scrubbing—removing unnecessary, inappropriate, or biased information and entries from the data used to train the AI. Researchers can also apply prejudice testing once a model is complete to see how it handles data from diverse groups of people. AI programmers can also implement methods of AI development that reduce the chance of prejudice.

Accountability

Accountability in AI is making sure that individuals or organizations are held responsible for how they develop and implement machine learning algorithms. The complexity of this is demonstrated by a simple example. Suppose a fully autonomous vehicle that allows the user to sleep or watch a movie while the car drives is involved in an accident, who is responsible for the damages? The vehicle manufacturer that made the car, the software developer who made the AI, or the user who oversaw the incident? If the damages were always tied back to the developer, like they are now, they would not develop fully autonomous vehicles. These organizations need to answer for decisions they make and negative consequences that may result from their AI systems but they also need reasonable protection or they will continue to stymie their own progress.

The law needs to reflect the reality that innovation is built on stability and predictability as well as the fact that companies need to be held responsible for decisions they make. The government could drastically assist in the development of AI by creating a regulatory body that oversees AI and technology. This new administration could approve AI programs, absolving them from most damages that result from AI “side effects” if the company 1) adequately knows and informs the user of the risks associated with the AI system, 2) proves that the AI can perform a specific task on par with or better than a human in a sort of task-specific “Turing test”, and 3) proves that they followed all appropriate procedures in the development of the AI, such as those described above.

Conclusion

By having an organization that funds and publishes research on AI, and publicizes information to the general public on how AI works as well as makes companies do peer-review data auditing, scrub their data, test for prejudice, implement methods of AI development that reduce chance of prejudice, inform the user risks and appropriate use, and prove their product can pass task-specific “Turing tests”, we can reduce the potential for unethical practice without reducing the potential of innovation within this determinative field. AI is the future. What do you want that future to look like?

“On Pluralism: French Culture”

BY ZACHARY BRIGHT

Early this year, I met with a senator from the French government. During a Q&A, someone asked him about the increasing number of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa. The senator responded, “When you walk down the streets of France, it is not in France. It’s the Middle East.” In other words, the senator worries immigrant’s culture appears to increasingly replace and remove France’s culture. Roughly defined, “culture” is the material, intellectual, and artistic products of a national identity, and that national identity’s values, vision, and etiquette [1].

In addition to the senator’s experience, in 2002, a poll surveyed some Middle Eastern and North African countries about how they view Western culture. Most countries had a somewhat or very negative view of Western culture [2]. Given the time of the poll, it’s likely Westerners did not esteem these countries’ cultures any better. Yet, relations with these countries and their cultures seem to have drastically improved. A 2012 study showed that 73% of the French did not believe their culture was superior [3]. So, the majority of France wants to accommodate different cultures.

Navigating the relationship between one’s culture and another foreign one reveals an interesting tension between the importance of a nation’s native culture and the necessity of accepting foreign cultures within the nation. This tension points us to a debate between multiculturalism and pluralism. Pluralism says that there should be one dominant host culture with co-existing subcultures. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, argues that all cultures should coexist and none should dominate. I believe that pluralism better protects French culture and better preserves cultural diversity globally.

In the framework of pluralism, France becomes the host country whose culture becomes the dominant one. A dominant culture is not a superior culture. Rather, once we find ourselves situated in a location in which there is a dominant culture, certain cultural obligations fall upon us. For example, we should learn and embrace the nation’s language (as much as one can), history, food, and artistic production. Thus, for those who find themselves in France, they should learn and embrace these aspects of French culture.

Why should we take this kind of obligation seriously? Consider an extreme example: imperial France. France sends their military to a North African country. They take the government by force, change the official language of the country to French, and force all citizens to adopt French culture. This act of white supremacy not only displaced the host nation’s culture, but also deemed their culture inferior. While the example is extreme, a lesson to elicit from this commonplace event in history is that, in a pluralistic model, the host country’s culture matters.

The trouble with pluralism is whether it can ensure the coexistence of other cultures. Multiculturalism responds to this worry much easier. No culture is superior to another, nor should any culture dominate another. I think pluralism, however, not only captures that benefit of multiculturalism by preserving other cultures in its own culture, but it also better preserves cultural diversity globally than multiculturalism.

Pluralism does not (or should not) posit that their host country is superior to a subculture. But, there needs to be a dominant host culture to ensure cultural diversity. So, in France, French culture should not be seen as superior to immigrant culture. France should learn about the diverse Middle Eastern and African cultures, or at a minimum, let them live their culture. However, these subcultures should recognize the prevalence of their host culture. In other words, they should learn French, its history, and enjoy its beautiful art.

This recognition of French culture as the host culture should, in turn, preserve other cultures globally better than multiculturalism. Since multiculturalism does not prioritize any culture, there is no reason to sustain one culture over another. So, the most psychologically, sociologically, or politically appealing cultures will slowly win out over other cultures potentially leading into the creation of one massive hybrid culture. Therefore, we would lose the diverse set of cultures we enjoy today. Pluralism, however, puts a pragmatic restriction on homogenizing all cultures. Since each nation acts as host to a culture, pluralism obligates those who situate themselves in that culture to embrace it as much as possible. And this embracement of another culture need not be a replacement. Thus, every culture respective to its native nation is preserved on a global scale.

Whether we should share the same level of worry about French culture that the senator has, I’m not sure. However, from his worry we learn the importance of a pluralistic approach to culture. Pluralism promises to maintain cultures worldwide while allowing for respect for other cultures. So, the next time you visit France, or any other country, try to embrace that nation’s culture: try to learn some of the language, history, and their artistic treasures.



SCAN ME

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