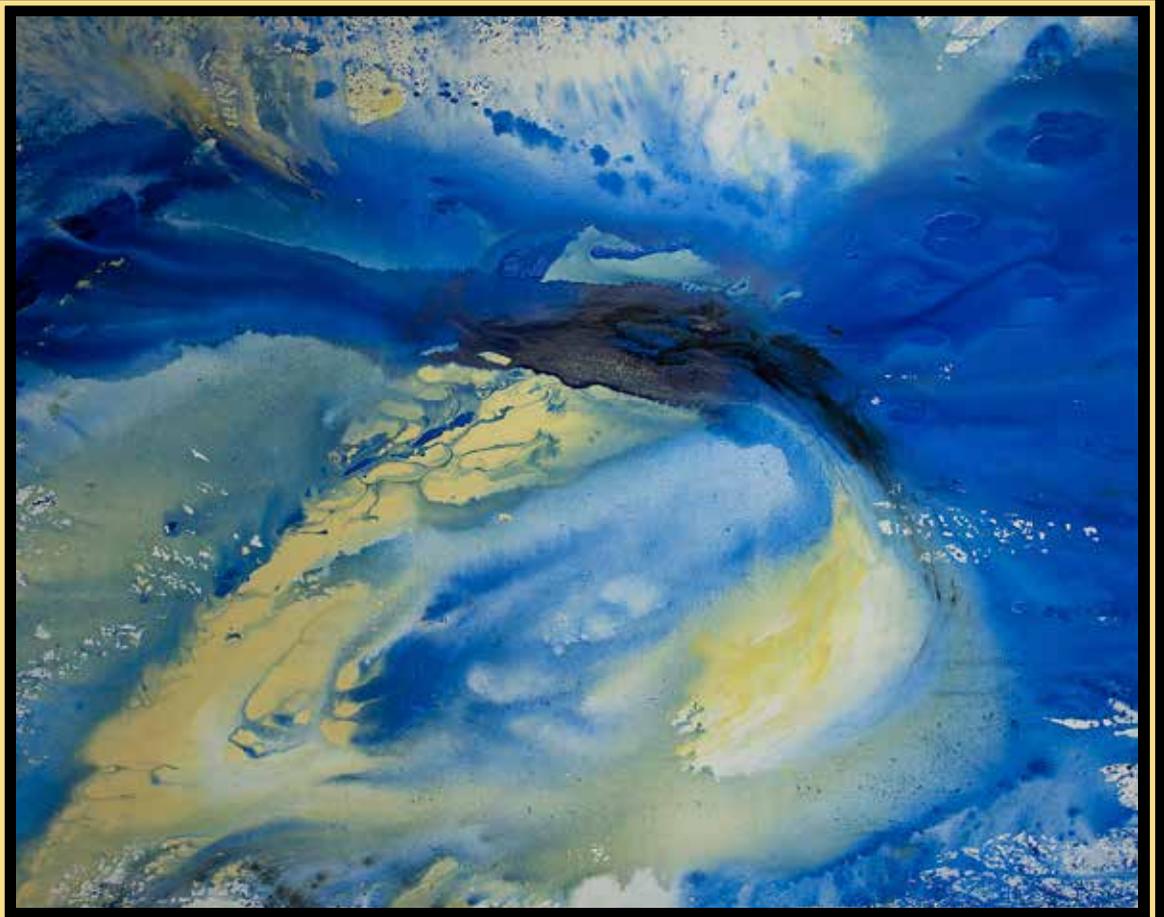


FALL 2022

VOL. 37, NO. 2

# KETTERING REVIEW

---



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving  
the quality of public life in the American democracy

---

Editors	<b>Noëlle McAfee and Elizabeth Gish</b>
Editorial Administrator	<b>Sarah Dahm</b>
Art Director/Production	<b>Long's Graphic Design, Inc.</b>
Copy Editors	<b>Lisa Boone-Berry and Amy Dragga</b>
Formatting	<b>Long's Graphic Design, Inc.</b>
Cover Design and Illustrations	<b>Carol Vollet Kingston</b>
Permissions	<b>Teresa Schwartz</b>

The *Kettering Review* ® is published by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation, chartered in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the *Kettering Review*, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

The *Review* welcomes manuscripts of 1,000-3,500 words and black-and-white line illustrations for themes appropriate to its interests. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed and stamped return envelopes. The editor assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. The *Review* also welcomes news of activities, programs, and events relevant to its expressed interests but reserves the right to publish such information at its discretion.

Copyright © 2022 by the Kettering Foundation

ISSN 0748-8815 (print)  
ISSN 2471-2914 (online)

KETTERING  
**REVIEW**

---

Fall 2022

# Contents

---

	5	Editors' Letter
Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman	9	The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding
Suzanne Mettler and Robert C. Lieberman	19	Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy
David Brooks	35	The Dark Century
Ezra Klein	41	Why We're Polarized
Nikole Hannah-Jones	48	Our Founding Ideals of Liberty and Equality Were False When They Were Written. Black Americans Fought to Make Them True. Without This Struggle, America Would Have No Democracy at All
Amanda Ripley	65	High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out
Danielle Allen	72	Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality
Sharon Davies	85	A Few Thoughts on Democracy

# Why We're Polarized

by Ezra Klein

*We give too much attention to national politics and too little to local politics, where our voices can matter much more.*

**A**s individuals, we aren't just responsible for changing the political system; we are also being changed by it. The primary way the system gets its hooks into us is by threatening or otherwise activating our political identities and using the catalytic energy to get us to contribute, vote, read, share, or just generally be pissed off. That's not always a bad thing, of course. Politics is a high-stakes enterprise, and there are plenty of times when we should contribute, vote, read, share, and, yes, be pissed off.

But there's a difference between polarization and manipulation. There's a difference between using politics for our purposes and being used for the political purposes of others. So I also want to discuss a few ways we can change our relationship to politics that can be both healthier for us and our country: identity mindfulness and rediscovering a politics of place.

## **Identity Mindfulness**

All politics is influenced by identity. That's not because all politics is literally identity politics. It's because all of human cognition is influenced by identity, and politics is part of human cognition. We cannot sever ourselves from our circumstances. We will never fully know how fully we've been shaped by our contexts. Who we are, where we grew up, whom we've learned to trust and fear, love and hate, respect and dismiss—it's deeper than conscious thought. The slate of mental processes built around the millisecond it takes an identity to activate isn't something we can simply slough off.

But if we can't turn off the power identity holds over us, we can harness it. Remember,

our identities are manifold. “Republican” is an identity, as is “Democrat.” But so is “fair-minded,” or “Christian,” or “curious,” or “New Yorker.” It can be as much an identity to see yourself as an advocate for the poor, for animals, or for children as to be a member of a political

---

## We all inhabit a larger context that shapes our actions.

---

party. The thing about the organized identities promoted by political coalitions is that there is a massive apparatus for defining, policing, and activating them. If you want to get out of that superstructure, it takes work. But it is possible.

If the beginning of wisdom on identity politics is recognizing that all of us are engaging in it all the time, the path of wisdom on identity politics is to be mindful of which of our identities are being activated, so that we can become intentional about which identities we work to activate. Like a muscle or a neural pathway, the identities we use most grow strongest, the ones that lie fallow weaken. We can wield that to our advantage. Doing so starts with mindfulness.

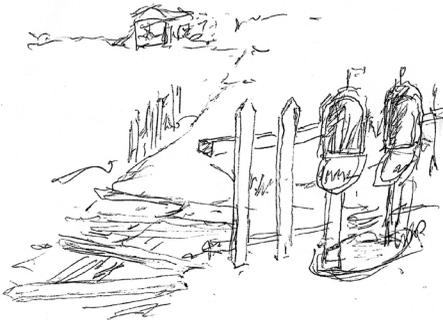
Yeah, I know. Of course, the politics book by the liberal Californian vegan ends with a call to mindfulness. But slowly take 10 breaths, making sure your mind doesn’t wander, and hear me out. Our environments are designed to activate some identities and not others. American life is full of American flags, for instance. Political life is full of reminders of the red-blue

divide and which side of it you’re on. Religious life is meant to pull you in one direction, hipster consumerism drags you in another, and hey, how about that local sports team whose paraphernalia is literally everywhere? There are massive, well-funded efforts strengthening our identities everywhere we turn. It takes work to see this happening within us, in real time. But it’s possible.

The practice of mindfulness is separable from the practice of meditation. Robert Wright, the eminent political journalist and Buddhist scholar, writes, “The word ‘mindful,’ as used around the time of [its] translation, meant ‘taking thought or care of; heedful of; keeping remembrance of.’ In other words: a mindful person is an acutely aware person, a person who proceeds with careful attention to all relevant factors.”<sup>1</sup>

In this case, the relevant factor I’m urging you to pay attention to is identity. What identity is that article invoking? What identity is making you defensive? What does it feel like when you get pushed back into an identity? Can you notice when it happens? If you log on to Twitter nine times a day, can you take a couple breaths at the end and ask yourself how differently you feel from before you logged on?

The idea here is to become more aware of the ways that politicians and media manipulate us. There are reams of research showing that our reaction to political commentary and information we don’t like is physical. Our breathing speeds up, our pupils narrow, our hearts beat faster. Trying to be aware of how politics makes us feel, of what happens when our identities are activated, threatened, or otherwise inflamed, is



a necessary first step to gaining some control of the process.

That is not to say we should become afraid of our identities being inflamed or strong emotions being forced forward. It's to say we should be mindful enough of what's happening to make decisions about whether we're pleased with the situation. Sometimes it's worth being angry. Sometimes it's not. If we don't take the time to know which is which, we lose control over our relationship with politics and become the unwitting instrument of others.

The point of this book is that we all inhabit a larger context that shapes our actions. Sometimes that context is difficult to change. But sometimes it is changeable. Our informational environments are one of those things. Once we recognize that we exist amid an omnipresent conspiracy to manipulate our identities, we can begin the hard work of fashioning our environment to shape and strengthen the identities we want to inhabit. And I have a suggestion of where to start.

### **Rediscovering a Politics of Place**

In March 2018, the *New York Times* published an article I think about often. Entitled

“The Man Who Knew Too Little,” it tracked the bizarre world Erik Hagerman had constructed for himself after the election. Depressed by the results, he decided he didn't want to know a thing about Trump. Nothing. “It was draconian and complete,” he said. “It's not like I wanted to just steer away from Trump or shift the conversation. It was like I was a vampire and any photon of Trump would turn me to dust.”<sup>2</sup>

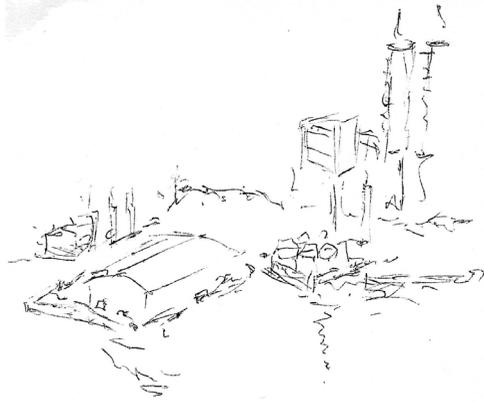
And so he set off building his bubble. A former Nike executive, he now lives alone on a pig farm in southeastern Ohio. He listens to white noise tapes at the coffee shop. He scolds friends who mention politics. He never looks at the news or social media. He goes to stores early to avoid overhearing talk of current events. When he visited his brother in San Francisco, “strict arrangements had to be made—the Sunday newspaper kept out of sight, the TV switched off, his teenage niece and nephew under special instructions.”

---

Political life is full of reminders of the red-blue divide and which side of it you're on.

---

So far, so nuts. But then, at the end, the story changed. Amid his withdrawal, he had focused his time on “a master project, one that he thinks about obsessively, that he believes can serve as his contribution to American society.” He had purchased 45 acres of land that used to sit atop a strip mine. The land became “his life's work.” He is restoring it, protecting it,



turning it into something his community can enjoy. Hagerman, it turns out, hadn't disengaged from civic life. He had simply disengaged from national politics to focus on local change. And he had constructed an informational ecosystem to support that choice. Perhaps he went too far in that project—way, way too far—but most of us are not going far enough.

I saw the article because the internet had erupted in outrage over it. “The *New York Times* managed to find the ultimate beacon of white privilege—and, arguably, the most insufferable person in the world,” read a representative tweet.<sup>3</sup> Who did Hagerman think he was? This rich White guy who wasn't going to get deported, who wouldn't be jailed, who probably wouldn't suffer at all under the Trump administration. Who was he to tune out the news the second it made him feel sad?

But then, who did we think we were? Were those of us sending angry missives into the ether really doing more than this guy who was restoring land to gift back to his neighbors?

My point is not that we should all go informationally Galt. But I'll be blunt here in a way

that cuts against my professional interests: we give too much attention to national politics, which we can do very little to change, and too little attention to state and local politics, where our voices can matter much more. The time spent spraying outrage over Trump's latest tweet—which is, to be clear, what he wants you to do; the point is to suck up all the media oxygen so he retains control of the conversation—is better spent checking in with what's happening in your own neighborhood.

“There are over five hundred thousand elected officials in the United States, only 537 of whom serve at the federal level,” writes Daniel Hopkins in *The Increasingly United States*.<sup>4</sup> The 537 federal officials are the ones we have the least power to influence, if only because they have, on average, the most constituents. But we often don't know the names of the officials nearest to us, even though they'd be glad to meet for coffee.

---

There's a real reward  
from rooting more of  
our political identities  
in the places we live.

---

This isn't because we're lazy, bad people. It's because media has nationalized, and there's been a particular reaping at the state and local level. I don't have an answer for that—revitalizing state and local journalism is a book unto itself—save to counsel effort. It's possible to make local and in-state news sources a bigger

part of your media diet and thus make your local political identity more powerful. It's just a lift, particularly when those stories aren't being pushed at you by friends on social media or covered by the national publications you love.

But there's a real reward from rooting more of our political identities in the places we live. First, we tend to live among people more like us, so the politics is less polarized. Second, the questions are often more tangible and less symbolic, so the discussion is often more constructive and less hostile. Third, we can have a lot more impact on state and local politics than on national politics, and it feels empowering to make a difference. And fourth, even if your heart lies in national politics—I'm a journalist who covers national politics, I get it—being involved in state and local politics will make you much more effective, both because it's valuable experience and because local officials eventually become federal officials, and they keep in touch with the people they've known along the way. When the next presidential campaign rolls around, the people they're going to want most as volunteers are the folks who already know how to organize in their communities.

Again, I'm not counseling you to abandon national politics. But audit your informational diet and ask what percentage of political stories you read are national versus state or local. Watch yourself for a week and reflect on how much of your political emotion and energy attach to the national stories. If that mix is overwhelmingly tilted toward the national scene, consider tilting it back.

I'll be honest: even writing these suggestions for solutions makes me a little queasy.

I began the book talking about midcentury political scientists desperate for more polarized parties. American politics is complex and unpredictable, and sometimes plans that are heralded as overdue solutions in one age become the defining problems of the next.

But then, that's the point, isn't it? There isn't an end state to American politics. The search for a static answer will always be folly. There is no one best way for the system to work. There is only the best we can do right now. And, if we do a good enough job at it, we will see today's successes ossify into tomorrow's frustrations. What works in one era fails in the next. That's okay. The point is to get to that next era with the most progress and the least violence.

I get asked often whether I'm optimistic or pessimistic about American politics. I think I'm an optimist, but that's because I try to hold to realism about our past. For all our problems, we have been a worse and uglier country at almost every other point in our history.

You do not need to go back to the country's early years—when new arrivals from Europe



drove out and murdered indigenous peoples, brought over millions of enslaved Africans, and wrote laws making women second-class citizens—to see it. Just a few decades ago, political assassinations were routine. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy was murdered on the streets of Dallas. In 1965, Malcolm X was shot to death in a crowded New York City ballroom. In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, as was Robert F. Kennedy. In 1975, Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, standing about arm’s length from President Gerald Ford, aimed her gun and fired; the bullet failed to discharge. Harvey Milk, the pioneering gay San Francisco city supervisor, was killed in 1978. President Ronald Reagan was shot in 1981; the bullet shattered a rib and punctured a lung.

For much of the 20th century, the right to vote was, for African Americans, no right at all. Lynchings were common. Freedom Riders were brutally beaten across the American South. Police had to escort young African American children into schools as jeering crowds shouted racial epithets and threatened to attack.

Violence broke out at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Urban riots ripped across the country. Crime was rising. The United States launched an illegal, secret bombing campaign in Cambodia. National Guard members fired on and killed student protesters at Kent State. Richard Nixon rode a backlash to the Civil Rights Movement into the White House, launched an espionage campaign against his

political opponents, provoked a constitutional crisis, and became the first American president driven to resign from office by impeachment proceedings.

This is not a counterintuitive take on American history, by the way. Among experts, it is closer to the consensus. The Varieties of Democracy Project, which has been surveying experts on the state of global democracies since 1900, gave the US political system a 48 on a 1 to 100 scale in 1945 and a 59 in 1965. It was only after the Civil Rights Movement that America began scoring in the 70s and 80s, marking it as a largely successful democracy.<sup>5</sup>

The era that we often hold up as the golden age of American democracy was far less democratic, far less liberal, far less decent, than today. Trump’s most intemperate outbursts, his most offensive musings, pale before opinions that were mainstream in recent history. And the institutions of American politics today are a vast improvement on the regimes that ruled well within living memory. If we can do a bit better tomorrow, we will be doing much, much better than we have ever done before.

---

*Ezra Klein is an American journalist, political analyst, New York Times columnist, and the host of The Ezra Klein Show podcast. This excerpt is from WHY WE’RE POLARIZED by Ezra Klein. Copyright © 2020 by Ezra Klein. Reprinted with the permission of Avid Reader Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. All rights reserved.*

---

**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Wright, “‘Mindful Resistance’ Is the Key to Defeating Trump,” *Vox*, October 9, 2017, [vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/10/2/16394320/mindful-resistance-key-defeating-trump-mindfulness](https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/10/2/16394320/mindful-resistance-key-defeating-trump-mindfulness).
- <sup>2</sup> Sam Dolnick, “The Man Who Knew Too Little,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2018, [nytimes.com/2018/03/10/style/the-man-who-knew-too-little.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/style/the-man-who-knew-too-little.html).
- <sup>3</sup> Shadi Hamid (@shadihamid), “The New York Times Managed to Find [...],” Twitter, March 14, 2018, 11:06 a.m., [twitter.com/shadihamid/status/973983762135515137](https://twitter.com/shadihamid/status/973983762135515137).
- <sup>4</sup> Shadi Hamid (@shadihamid), “The New York Times Managed to Find [...],” Twitter, March 14, 2018, 11:06 a.m., [twitter.com/shadihamid/status/973983762135515137](https://twitter.com/shadihamid/status/973983762135515137).
- <sup>5</sup> Ezra Klein, “American Democracy Has Faced Worse Threats Than Donald Trump,” *Vox*, May 10, 2018, [vox.com/2018/5/10/17147338/donald-trump-illiberal-undemocratic-elections-politics](https://www.vox.com/2018/5/10/17147338/donald-trump-illiberal-undemocratic-elections-politics).

# *Kettering Foundation*

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459; (937) 434-7300

444 North Capitol Street NW, Suite 434, Washington, DC 20001; (202) 393-4478

---



REVIEW FALL 2022