



Leading Amid Polarization

David Brubaker with Sarah Bixler

WHAT IS POLARIZATION?

Polarization refers to the process by which people in a social group increasingly come to hold opinions at the more extreme ends of a spectrum. Polarization can appear in any social system—a family, a community, a congregation, or a society.

Cases of a system “splitting down the middle” are quite rare. It is more common for a polarized system to divide into three relatively equal parts, with the two ends each representing about a third of the total and the center another third. Because the ends are more vocal than the middle, however, the “third voice” of the center is often overlooked.

WHAT CAUSES POLARIZATION?

While the country has been polarized in previous historical eras (including the American Revolution, the Civil War, and during the 1960s), as political polarization increased in the United States over the past 40 years, much research has focused on the causes of societal-level polarization, identifying these possible causes:

1. Economic inequality (growing gap between the richest and poorest citizens)
2. Identity threats (including a feared loss of status by many white Americans as the country becomes increasingly diverse)
3. Racism and racial inequality
4. Sexism and gender inequality
5. Differing moral universes (see Jayne Docherty and Sara Bixler’s piece on worldviewing)
6. Global nationalism (the global rise of populist and nationalist leaders)
7. Balkanized media (the polarization of the media, as illustrated by Fox News and MSNBC)
8. Political structure (the “winner take all” system of American elections)
9. Social sorting (individuals voluntarily choosing to associate only with like-minded others)
10. Leadership-driven polarization (leaders who foment “us versus them” thinking)

HOW CAN ONE LEAD IN POLARIZED TIMES?

The twin temptations for leaders are to take a side (fight) or to run from the fray (flee). But there is a third way for leaders caught in the web of polarized relationships. Drawing from



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social theory and biblical and theological insights, leaders can keep in mind five principles for courageous leadership in polarized contexts:

1. **Engage conflict when it emerges, not just after it erupts.** Since conflict is much more manageable at lower levels, leaders need to move toward it when it’s small. Doing so “takes heart,” and Christ’s presence empowers us to do so (Psalm 31:24; John 16:33).
2. **Learn to “manage polarities,” not just “resolve conflicts.”** Many of our challenges involve two realities that must be held together (e.g., “personal freedom” and “community responsibility”), and thus are not amenable to a simple resolution. The Gospels show Jesus managing competing perspectives by giving new metaphors or breaking out of common assumptions about a persistent conflict.
3. **Remember that as goes the leadership, so goes the congregation or organization.** Focus on keeping your leadership team united rather than trying to keep all the members of the broader congregation or organization happy. In the most critical moments of his leadership,

Jesus focused on building a unified team of disciples rather than trying to please other religious leaders or members of the crowd.

4. **Speak your truth.** Leaders who consistently withhold their own thoughts or opinions are often viewed as manipulative and insincere. Share your deepest beliefs and values. Spend time in prayerful solitude discerning what matters to you most and lean on God's strength to share it in authentic ways.
5. **Stay connected.** It is equally important to invite others to share their deepest beliefs and values. The goal is to both self-define *and* stay connected. Holistic connection is based first of all on love of God, from which flows loving connection to self and others (Matthew 22:35-40).

HOW MIGHT WE OVERCOME POLARIZATION?

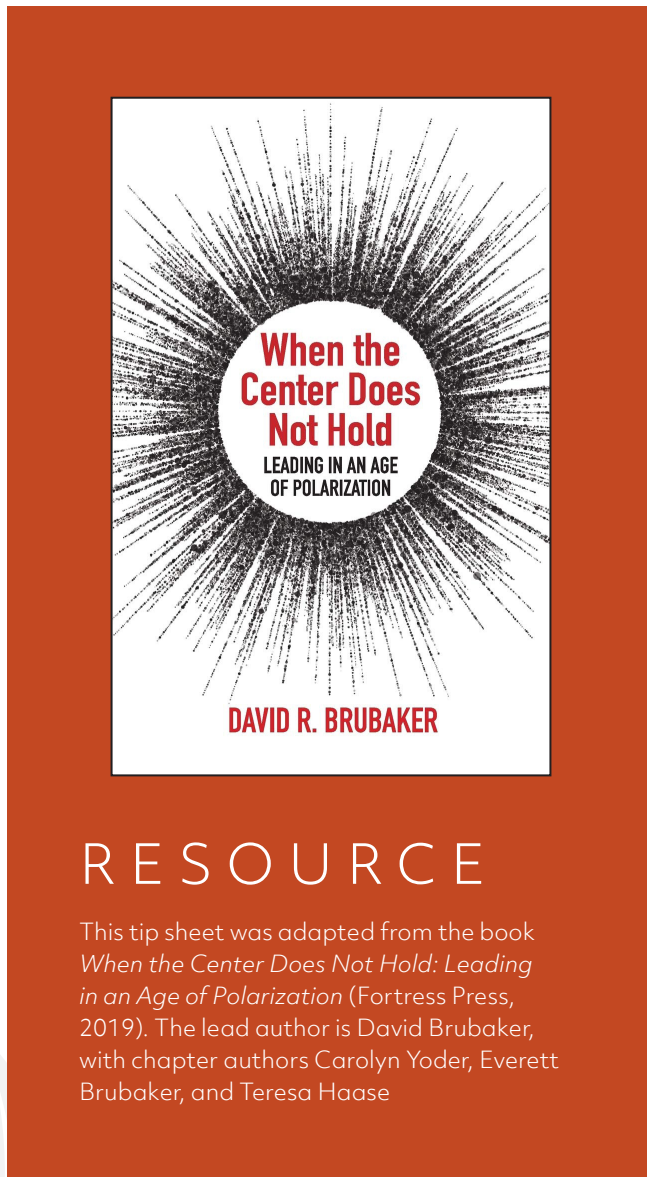
As followers of Jesus, our most compelling model for overcoming polarization is Jesus himself. Jesus called 12 disciples that represented the full range of his polarized society—from a freedom-fighting zealot to a collaborating tax collector. And while Jesus confronted the oppressive behavior of religious and political leaders, he had nothing but compassion for the people themselves. Time and again Jesus is moved with compassion—genuine care and concern for those around him (Matthew 9:36).

If we want to contribute to reweaving our fractured society, we will need to treat others with dignity as beloved children of God, seek first to understand and stay connected,¹ and bring people together in cooperative efforts to improve our communities, focusing on shared values that we hold in common.

1. As the prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) states, "Lord make me an instrument of your peace. . . . Grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted, to understand rather than to be understood, to love than to be loved."



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RESOURCE

This tip sheet was adapted from the book *When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization* (Fortress Press, 2019). The lead author is David Brubaker, with chapter authors Carolyn Yoder, Everett Brubaker, and Teresa Haase



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