

We are becoming a very polarized nation but our polarization certainly pre-dates the present administration. In the '30s Father Coughlin gave fascist rants on national radio broadcasts. The Ku Klux Klan grew in both the 1930s and 1960s, while extremist groups grew on the left as well. During the tension of the Vietnam War sons were disowned and pastors dismissed.

Yet, we take for granted the progress that came out of those two eras: Social Security, Medicare, limits on the length of the work week, rights for people with different abilities, rights for Black people and others of color, rights for women and elders and children. Those gains were the results of creative responses at heights of polarization.

Even if polarization is unlikely to go away soon, the good news is that if Americans can respond to this period creatively, it may be an opportunity for progress. In the decades following World War II, Democrats and Republicans governed with a bipartisan spirit, and politics was known as the art of compromise. During that period economic inequality was also relatively low. In the 1970s and '80s, the income gap grew rapidly, and so did political polarization. Political polarization seems to be intimately linked to income inequality. If this is true then it should not be a surprise that since the economic crash of 2007, inequality has accelerated right along with political polarization.

With the present administration and Congressional majority I see no policies in place or any likely to be passed that will substantially check inequality's growth. So polarization is likely to get worse, and uglier. To stay clear-headed in the years ahead, we need to accept the reality of our present situation. Mahatma Ghandi used to remind his people that the British Empire would not go away through denying its existence. To end the suffering brought by the Empire, he thought it necessary to first acknowledge its presence. The next step: a creative response. So what does a creative response to polarization look like for us?

The first, of course is inclusivity. It is tempting to define oneself by a smaller and smaller circle, to retreat into a bubble, perhaps reinforced by Facebook and other social media. That's the opposite of smart navigation of polarization, which is to expand the circle, to broaden our acquaintance, to engage in ongoing dialogue with those our fears might lead us to dismiss.

The second is a shared vision. The good news for us is that we do not need to start from scratch in generating a vision. Poll data indicate that majorities of Americans are already in agreement on many issues.

The question is whether the many Americans who are deeply concerned about change that benefits the majority will step up as a whole, and create the next great Era of Change.