



# Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide

*Cass R. Sunstein*

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## Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide Cass R. Sunstein

Why do people become extremists? What makes people become so dismissive of opposing views? Why is political and cultural polarization so pervasive in America?

In **Going to Extremes**, renowned legal scholar and best-selling author Cass R. Sunstein offers startling insights into why and when people gravitate toward extremism. Sunstein marshals a wealth of evidence that shows that when like-minded people gather in groups, they tend to become more extreme in their views than they were before. Thus when liberals group get together to debate climate change, they end up more alarmed about climate change, while conservatives brought together to discuss same-sex unions become more set against same-sex unions. In courtrooms, radio stations, and chatrooms, enclaves of like-minded people are breeding ground for extreme movements. Indeed, Sunstein shows that a good way to create an extremist group, or a cult of any kind, is to separate members from the rest of society, either physically or psychologically. Sunstein's findings help to explain such diverse phenomena as political outrage on the Internet, unanticipated "blockbusters" in the film and music industry, the success of the disability rights movement, ethnic conflict in Iraq and former Yugoslavia, and Islamic terrorism.

Providing a wealth of real-world examples—sometimes entertaining, sometimes alarming—Sunstein offers a fresh explanation of why partisanship has become so bitter and debate so rancorous in America and abroad.

### Praise for the hardcover:

"A path-breaking exploration of the perils and possibilities created by polarization among the like-minded."  
—Kathleen Hall Jamieson, co-author of **unSpun** and **Echo Chamber**

"Poses a powerful challenge to anyone concerned with the future of our democracy. He reveals the dark side to our cherished freedoms of thought, expression and participation. Initiates an urgent dialogue which any thoughtful citizen should be interested in."  
—James S. Fishkin, author of **When the People Speak**

## Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide Details

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# From Reader Review Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide for online ebook

## Stephen says

Good and easy to read. Thankfully it's not very long either.

This book is very relevant to today and has a lot to offer as to what causes division, animosity, and aggression.

There is more to be learned on this issue, but this is a good book to start for anyone interested in studying why and how we can go to extremes.

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## Ldrutman Drutman says

Back in 2005, a trio of researchers conducted a little experiment on deliberative democracy. They assembled groups of six citizens and asked them to get together to talk about a few politically charged issues (civil unions, affirmative action, global warming). Half the groups were made up exclusively of political conservatives, and half were made up exclusively of political liberals. The result: in almost every group, the individuals took on more extreme positions after talking with the folks who already agreed with them.

Similarly, a study of judicial decision-making found three-judge panels that were all Republican rendered more conservative decisions and three-judge panels that were all Democrat rendered more liberal decisions.

The above experiment and study form the take-off point for *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, by Cass R. Sunstein, a smart book (now available in paperback!) that sets forth a pithy summary of how group polarization happens. It's an especially useful guide to the obstacles to open-minded thinking for those of us who are trying to chart a course toward a more moderate politics, and so worth understanding.

The quick takeaway point is that what matters most is information. If you only hear one side of the argument, you are likely to strengthen your convictions that the one side you hear is the correct side. And the more your convictions are strengthened, the more you are likely to seek out only that one side and disregard anyone who comes to you with alternatives. In short, a powerful reinforcing feedback loop.

"A great deal of what we believe, like, and dislike," writes Sunstein, "is influenced by the exchange of information and by corroboration."

Sunstein explores a number of entry points into these kinds of reinforcing cascades of corroboration. A surprisingly large number of the entry points have more to do with social instincts than anything else. Individuals defer to other individuals who are of higher status; they defer to family and friends and social groups. Most people want to be liked, and most people have an intuitive sense that a good way to be liked is to agree – or sometimes to even do those whose respect they wish to gain one better. Groups are particular prone to follow confident people – even if those confident people are wrong.

Once people start in on a particular belief path, they tend to be on the lookout for information that confirms what they already think: "Consider the well-established finding that after purchasing a product, people tend

to seek out information confirming that their purchase was a sensible one.” And once caught in a cascade of confirmation, it’s hard to get out of it. Sociologists call it “homophily” – a process by which people feel more connected to that which is similar to them.

The problem, Sunstein argues (borrowing a phrase from Russell Hardin) is that most people have a “crippled epistemology” – they know very little to begin with, and if what they know supports their extremism, they have no way to know that their position is extreme.

Worse, “people often ignore powerful contrary evidence,” writes Sunstein. “When people’s false beliefs are corrected, they might become even firmer in their commitment to those beliefs.” (One famous example of this is described in Leon Festinger’s 1956 book *When Prophecy Fails*, about how members of a UFO cult become more resolute in its beliefs after the group leader’s prophecy that aliens from the planet Clarion would rescue cult members from an earth-destroying flood on December 21, 1954 did not come to fruition)

Sunstein worries that in the modern media environment, self-selection into different camps is easier than ever before. “Many people appear to be hearing more and louder versions of their own views, thus reducing the benefits that come from exposure to competing views and unnoticed problems...The Internet creates more dramatic ‘stratification.’”

The way out of polarization, of course, is the standard bromide of entertaining alternative viewpoints. Sunstein urges “humility and curiosity.” In fact, after reading this article, you should probably immediately go seek out a perspective you disagree with, entertain it, and let it create a slight sense of doubt in all your previous certainties.

But the truth is, you probably won’t go seek that out. Or even if you do, it’s unlikely you will come to doubt your previous ideas. One reason is that what you find will probably be written from a completely different perspective, meaning that it won’t have much to say to somebody who isn’t already a true believe from the opposite perspective.

At the very least, it is helpful to have a certain amount of self-awareness. Sunstein’s analysis of how easily and almost effortlessly one can get caught in a self-reinforcing feedback process of one-sidedness is a little bit scary. What’s remarkable is just how easily the mind closes, and how much constant work is required to fight against it. In other words: those of us who care about moderation have our work cut out for ourselves.

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## **Paddy says**

Not much original material here, mostly a re-stating of classic studies and theories. A good idea for a book but not really fleshed out.

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## **jennifer says**

Interesting! and scary. surprisingly, this helped me to better appreciate the never ending and seemingly counterproductive opposition within the US government. checks and balances is where it's at, yo.

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## **Jeevan Arakal says**

This book will be a useful reading for those of us who want to understand the pursuit of human endeavors in group settings; it presents a nuanced view of the same and offers many interesting questions for researchers in varied academic disciplines. The book will be a valuable resource for those of us trying to understand how human beings go to extremes, pursue change and inhibit it, accommodate and stifle others and those looking for possible solutions to solve the riddle of “group polarization”.

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## **Phoenix says**

### **The Longer Version**

At roughly twice the length this is simply the longer version of Sunstein's book *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done*. The main examples and core ideas are the same, there's a bit extra on bias and an index and bibliography at the back that the other lacks. Some of the extra material include a light comparison of the effectiveness of Presidential cabinet contrasting Lincoln's "Team of Rivals" to Bush's team of like minded people. It adds experiments and observations of the different behaviour of like minded and mixed groups of people in the polarization of their decisions, especially judges and jurors (mixing Democrats with Republicans) as well as community group, as well as an analysis of consciousness raising, conspiracy and terrorist groups.

Readers will also pick up some extra terminology, such as "crippled epistemology" - basically flawed belief systems, "homophily" - the idea that similarity breeds connection, Condorcet's "Jury Theorem", "sensibles" vs "haters" and "exit", the phenomenon where more moderate and possibly more motivated members of a group may choose to leave making the remaining group composition both more extreme and more compliant. However considering society as a whole, Sunstein does not see polarization as bad as different segments of society can make different social decisions that may either be more locally appropriate, or provide alternate communities to people who don't fit in one or another social group. He does consider that Presidential boards which require a 3:2 mix of people from either party to be a good thing, which I'm not entirely convinced of that the categories themselves are a good way to appoint decision makers. He also mentions another interesting observation that conflicting information given to a polarized group tends not to lead to changing anyone's mind but further entrenchment.

If you are looking for a lighter read, pick up *On Rumors* instead. This version is still at the level of popular sociology, there are reasonable discussions of the Milgram and Zimbardo (Stanford) experiments, and you'll pick up more surrounding argument in support of Sunstein's views. Also, If you are a teacher of middle or high school students who's assigned *Rumors* as reading or tackling the book at college level, this version will give you more depth and an indication for further reading.

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## **John says**

This is a book about people with views to the far right or far left. It cites some interesting studies on human behavior. For example, one study concludes that when people of one extreme or the other get together, they are even more extreme after they meet than they were before. The extremism feeds on itself and makes itself

stronger. So when people on the right interact only with other people on the right, they go farther to the right; when people on the left interact only with other people on the left, they go farther to the left. Also, when people with a very strong interest in a topic are faced with contrary evidence, instead of moderating their views they become even stronger in their views to withstand it. Hardly earth-shattering, given the current polarized political climate, but the studies are interesting.

Sunstein's "solution" to this is a Public Forum Doctrine that is somewhat reminiscent of the Fairness Doctrine. Cass Sunstein thinks that the state should "nudge" people towards correct behavior. Sunstein co-wrote a book called "Nudge" about that tactic; he also wrote a book about FDR that praised him most effusively for the New Deal. "Nudge" is a "Tipping Point" kind of book with a blurb by the Freakonomics author. Those who implement "nudging" are called "choice architects".

Sunstein labels himself a proponent of "libertarian paternalism", an oxymoronic term that means the state should not regulate behavior, but should use persuasion (obvious or hidden) to direct behavior--AKA "soft paternalism" or "asymmetrical paternalism". This reminded me of those books popular in the 70s about subliminal advertising.

Sunstein received a law degree from Harvard, taught in Chicago, has been a friend and advisor to Obama for years, and was announced as Obama's "regulation czar". (Or, I guess, the "National Choice Architect".) But he has not yet been confirmed, mostly because of statements such as this: "I will suggest that animals should be permitted to bring suit, with human beings as their representatives, to prevent violations of current law," which have caused politicians in farming states to oppose him.

You can see why conservatives may disagree with Sunstein's ideas. However, progressives aren't always thrilled with Sunstein either, because he has some libertarian, anti-regulatory ideas, salted with a little free-trade economics. But this should make Sunstein more appealing to open-minded moderates and conservatives, and the book is worth reading -- unless you belong to one of the extremes and won't be influenced by competing ideas.

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## **Shiny nickel says**

Off this review:

Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide

Cass Sunstein (Oxford University Press)

In *Going to Extremes*, Sunstein lays out a simple argument based equally on social science, historical analysis, and an eye on current events: Like-minded people amplify their beliefs when they are together. This "group polarization" can be found everywhere from Al-Qaeda training camps to the self-selected enclaves of information and opinion to which we gravitate online. This phenomenon isn't necessarily bad, but it is both powerful and commonplace. And considering his position in President Obama's inner circle of big thinkers, Cass Sunstein's work and theories have never been more important.

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## **Kim says**

Serious treatment of an important problem. However, while the author made concrete proposals directed to

the leadership cadre, he gives very little advice for instituting positive change from the bottom up, which is where such change must begin.

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### **bitmaid says**

"The most important reason for group polarization, and a key to extremism in all its forms, involves the exchange of new information."

I don't think so. The author thinks one is more likely to moderate oneself if one lacks information on the subject. If anything the development in the Middle East proves it's stupid to choose camps, and not even the old age of the book excuses the mistake because the situation has been going on too long. Also people can form strong opinions without knowing much about anything let alone indoctrination.

The more I look at it, the more it looks like the book is about group psychology, on a more superficial level than extremism that is. In that case Le Bon is a hundred years ahead of him. This book is just far fetched and lacking substance. It didn't help that there is yet another attempt to redesign democracy. The little experiment can't prove shit on the topic of EXTREMISM, HELLO!

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### **Ashoke Chakrabarti says**

i read this book years ago and thought about it post election. So prescient.

People are flawed. Knowing that, it is our collective responsibility to guide one other toward the light, especially those who know the path.

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### **Tarmo Jüristo says**

"Going to Extremes" is a slim volume on a huge topic. Why does it happen that when a bunch of like-minded people discuss something, they almost invariably end up, both personally and collectively, holding an opinion that is much more radical than what they started with? And what should we do with this knowledge?

I was really torn between 3 and 4 stars for this book. What tilted the final verdict towards a lower score was perhaps due to the book's brevity, which in itself may not be a bad thing for many readers. Sunstein raises a few interesting questions and pursues them in an intelligent fashion - but finally stops short of going into the truly thorny implications. Again, this may be fine with most of his readers. However, I suspect that there will be many people who are left unconvinced by Sunstein's own take (which, to be honest, he doesn't press upon too hard) and would have appreciated a somewhat broader discussion.

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### **Bob Duke says**

Well worth reading. In the age of the internet we are able to choose our information bubbles and ideological bubbles which leads to us becoming more extreme in our views. Traditional media serendipitously provides



us with views and information that we would not otherwise seek out. The internet allows us to filter out such sources and engage in dialogues with like minded people who reinforce our views.

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### **Kathleen O'Neal says**

For a long time, I've been aware of Cass Sunstein but on some level I was always hesitant to engage too much with his work. I was under the impression that he was one of those moderate for the sake of moderation types whose work I often find to be overly simplistic, recycling conventional wisdom as novel and profound insights. However, over the past year, I have become more and more alarmed as I have watched both the nation as a whole and many people I know personally appear to become more extreme on a wide range of topics while simultaneously also becoming more unmoored from reality in their assessments of the facts. I decided that, even if Sunstein is the sort of mushy moderate that often annoys me, his work on extremism was worth engaging with in more depth. After reading his brief and breezy 2009 book "Going To Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide," I am happy to report that Sunstein's lack of an obvious partisan bias was downright refreshing and that he was also perfectly capable of recognizing some of the positive aspects of some types of extremism under the right circumstances. Sunstein's main concerns are with the harms that can occur when groups of like-minded individuals insulate themselves both from objective information and from those with different points of view. During a period in time in which many people are rightly concerned about our political culture and discourse becoming increasingly untethered from any sort of connection with facts, about citizens' increasing self-segregation in polarized ideological silos both online and offline, and about demands by students on college campuses as well as others to be protected from speech that they find uncomfortable, Sunstein's analysis is perhaps even more prescient now than when the book first came out.

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### **James says**

Very good book about how extremist view points and politics are formed by individuals and groups. This book provides basically an extended literature review of studies on group opinion formation, why individuals will do things that in normal circumstances would be abhorrent, and also on writings on how to prevent extremism. He finishes with a few examples of when extremism can be good, such as the American Revolution and the Civil Rights Movement.

He digs into some of the gray areas and embraces the idea of uncertainty and the idea that not everyone should always think the same.

A good read if you want to get into the psychology of what makes a terrorist or the source of extreme partizanship in the USA.

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