

## 11. Have We Tipped? (2024) JJ Winham

There has been an avalanche of articles in newspapers and journals trying to explain current political polarities. Each comes up with a different cause. I would like to suggest a fairly simplistic but integrated perspective.

In his book, *American Nations*, Colin Woodard identifies 11 distinct cultures in North America. He then argues that today's differences are due to divergent and persistent biases at the time of settlement. In my reading, it seemed there were really two dominant cultures that gave rise to most of the others. These were the New England "utopians" and the South Carolina "slave-owners". Each of these cultures exported its views to new states, eventually leading to two large coalitions that fought for dominance in the Civil War.

I think this example reflects a general pattern in human history: a conflict between the same two social and economic options. These are the cooperative society and the selfish society.

There are three key conditions that typify cooperative societies:

- *Teamwork*: Allometry is an important principal in biology that says that the efficiency or effectiveness of a body depends upon its size. Larger animals find it easier to keep warm than smaller ones. I would argue that there are certain functions in social living for which cooperative groups are more efficient and effective than smaller groups or independent individual action. In modern times, these might include the building of roads and bridges, education, and fielding militaries. Cooperative societies often exploit such allometric advantages of teamwork.
- *Fairness*: No society, whether of animals or people, can escape cheaters. These will try to exploit weaknesses in the social fabric to benefit themselves at the expense of others. The reason we have laws and regulations is to limit cheating and ensure fairness. It is also the reason why most cooperative societies have manners. Manners confirm that society members respect each other and can be trusted to act fairly.
- *Charity*: Success in one's endeavors surely depends in part on one's skill and prowess. but anyone who has lived as long as I have must admit that chance plays just as big a role. In a cooperative society, those for whom chance has been kind and generous should acknowledge their luck and be willing to help those for whom chance has been less kind. In a way, charity ensures fairness in the face of chance.

None of these conditions comes free. Teamwork needs to be funded, usually via taxes. Regulations limit the options for individuals to make money doing things that might harm others. Charity means giving up some of your own profits to help somebody else. A cooperative society is stable only if the benefits of cooperation exceed these costs. This is often called the social contract.

The alternative to a cooperative society is a selfish one. Everyone is out for themselves. Private enterprise is always favored over taxation-supported cooperation. There are no laws to ensure fairness, and in fact there may be laws to guarantee inequality. Welfare and charity are absent.

Such societies invariably become highly "pyramidal" with a few wealthy dominants at the top, increasing numbers as one moves to lower economic levels, and usually slaves and beggars at the bottom. Nepotism and inherited wealth make it difficult for anyone to climb up the pyramid.

What happens if a society has opposing advocates for these two alternatives? Some insights can be gained by setting up an evolutionary game model where cooperative and selfish advocates compete to control the society. In evolutionary game theory, one looks for an evolutionarily stable strategy (ESS), which is one that when sufficiently common cannot be invaded by the other. At least in all the examples I have seen that had reasonable assumptions, this game always has two ESS's: one in which the majority of the society cooperates, and the other in which the majority of the society is selfish. Neither strategy is the only ESS. There is a tipping point between these extremes: when the fraction of cooperators in the society is higher than this tipping point, it pays for most individuals to be cooperative. There will be some cheaters, but they will not do well. If the fraction of cooperators in the society drifts below the tipping point, then it is on average better to be selfish. This drives the society over time all the way to mostly selfish. And since neither strategy is the only ESS, it is possible that a given population will bounce back-and-forth between the two extremes over time.

Do such transitions really happen in human societies? Absolutely! The historian Thucydides describes numerous shifts between democracy and oligarchy in Greek city-states. Ancient Rome shifted from a more cooperative republic to a very hierarchical empire. Both the United States and France deposed oligarchies and replaced them with democracies. Supposedly egalitarian communist societies often degenerate through graft and corruption into selfish ones.

As Heather Fox Richardson details in *Democracy Awakening*, proponents for cooperative and selfish societies have been at each other's throats throughout US history. For example, 1930s Democrats were able to forge a renewed cooperative society system with the New Deal. And not surprisingly, the Republicans have since tried to push our society back to the alternative. At least until recently, the Republican party reluctantly accepted living in a cooperative society. They defended the union and relied on legislative and judicial tools to negotiate lower taxes, reduced regulations, and minimal welfare. The push-pull between liberals and conservatives over where to draw the line is probably a healthy thing, allowing a society to adjust to changing conditions. Unfortunately, the Republican Party no longer accepts living in a cooperative society and is now advocating for a full conversion to a selfish one.

The coming election fits this model exactly. Most of the policies advocated by the Democratic Party are those required for any cooperative society: teamwork funded by taxation, regulated capitalism, good manners, and charity. And what do the Republicans advocate? They want exactly the opposite: no taxation, no rules or business regulations, and certainly no welfare. Policies endorsed by Project 2025 explicitly argue for the antithesis of a cooperative society. For example, women and racial minorities would be consigned to the lower levels of the resulting economic pyramid and white males to the top. Christianity would be the only allowed religion. Incompatible books would be banned, and only one party would be allowed political power.

So, how close are we to a tipping point? In evolutionary games where you know the payoffs, you can calculate the tipping point. Our economies are so complicated that I can't imagine anyone

trying to do so. Still, the signs are there. As Thomas Piketty showed a decade ago, unregulated capitalism has resulted in acute economic skew worldwide. Large numbers of people may now feel that the benefits of cooperation no longer compensate for the costs. Tribalism is often an intermediate stage in the breakdown of cooperative societies, and we are now seeing widespread tribal conflict based on religion, race, gender, and education levels. Manners and respect for rules are minimal: how many people did you see run stop signs last week? And there has been a widespread erosion of respect for government, education, science, and truth itself.

Is it too late? Are we doomed? Maybe. One would have to reduce the widespread economic skew to persuade unhappy citizens to buy back into the social contract. One suggested cause of the skew is the widespread relocation of many US industries abroad. In addition to leaving many US workers without a job, moving offshore allows US industries to avoid taxes (e.g., Apple in Ireland), dodge US regulations, and pay reduced worker benefits. Current efforts to "reshore" our industries are already underway, and incentives for the industries to do so themselves are increasing (<https://www.davron.net/reshoring-u-s-companies-bringing-manufacturing-home/>). This is a good sign.

But there is a big problem. In the 1950s, Congress and the Federal Communications Commission instituted a "fairness doctrine" for newspapers, radio, and television. Equal time and space were to be devoted to contrasting views on political topics. This kept wild deviations from the truth in public media to a minimum. Then in 1985, President Ronald Reagan and his appointees revoked this doctrine. Congress tried to reinstate it with a bill, but Reagan vetoed it. The result has been an increasing maelstrom of false information with no way for the average citizen to determine the truth. Entire networks pump out false information for political reasons. Even if we reduce the economic skew, the overwhelming misinformation may convince many voters that the social contract is still no longer good for them.

The problem was compounded in 2010 when a conservative Supreme Court decided to reverse prior policy and allow corporations and other outside groups to contribute money to elections (Citizens United decision). Since most voters get their political information on television, and there is no longer a fairness doctrine, whichever political group has the most money to buy TV ads can easily sway people to their side.

You might expect the wealthy and big corporations to side with Republicans pushing for conversion to a selfish society, and this is often true. But recent evidence that low- or moderate-skew cooperative societies are more stable and productive than selfish ones is presumably why a surprising number of wealthy donors and corporations are supporting the Democrats in the current election. This is also a good sign, but whether it is enough is unclear.

Other gambits include eliminating the electoral college, imposing term limits on the Supreme Court, revitalizing public education, and restoring the fairness doctrine.

So, returning to the question: if we were well past the tipping point, we would see our society rushing headlong to one of the ESS's. But we don't. The polls seem to be pretty even with small perturbations to either side and then back. If you are reading this after the 2024 election, you know what happened. But for those of us now, it's hard to get a good night's rest....