

Opinion | OP-ED COLUMNIST

# How Progressives Win the Culture War

David Brooks MARCH 1, 2018

I wonder if I'm wrong on the subject of guns. I started this latest round of the debate with the presumption that supporters of moderate gun restrictions are popularly strong but legislatively weak. Since Sandy Hook in 2012, more than two dozen states have passed gun laws and almost all of those laws have LOOSENED gun restrictions. Roughly 360 gun bills have been introduced in Congress, and they have all failed but one, which also loosened gun use.

The blunt fact is that Republicans control most legislatures. To get anything passed, I thought, it would be necessary to separate some Republicans from the absolutist N.R.A. position. To do that you have to depolarize the issue: show gun owners some respect, put red state figures at the head and make the gun discussion look more like the opioid discussion. The tribalists in this country have little interest in the opioid issue. As a result, a lot of pragmatic things are being done across partisan lines.

The people pushing for gun restrictions have basically done the exact opposite of what I thought was wise. Instead of depolarizing the issue they have massively polarized it. The students from Parkland are being assisted by all the usual hyper-polarizing left-wing groups: Planned Parenthood, Move On and the Women's March. The rhetoric has been extreme. Marco Rubio has been likened to a mass murderer while the N.R.A. has been called a terrorist organization.

4

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The early results would seem to completely vindicate my position. The Florida Legislature turned aside gun restrictions. New gun measures in Congress have been quickly shelved. Democrats are more likely to lose House and Senate seats in the key 2018 pro-gun states. The losing streak continues.

Yet I have to admit that something bigger is going on. It could be that progressives understood something I didn't. It could be that you can win more important victories through an aggressive cultural crusade than you can through legislation. Progressives could be on the verge of delegitimizing their foes, on guns but also much else, rendering them untouchable for anybody who wants to stay in polite society. That would produce social changes far vaster than limiting assault rifles.

Two things have fundamentally changed the landscape. First, over the past two years conservatives have self-marginalized. In supporting Donald Trump they have tied themselves to a man whose racial prejudices, sexual behavior and personal morality put him beyond the pale of decent society.

While becoming the movement of Dinesh D'Souza, Sean Hannity and Franklin Graham, they have essentially expelled the leaders and thinkers who have purchase in mainstream culture. Conservatism is now less a political or philosophic movement and more a separatist subculture that participates in its own ostracism.

Second, progressives are getting better and more aggressive at silencing dissenting behavior. All sorts of formerly legitimate opinions have now been deemed beyond the pale on elite campuses. Speakers have been disinvited and careers destroyed. The boundaries are being redrawn across society.

As Andrew Sullivan noted recently, "workplace codes today read like campus speech codes of a few years ago." There are a number of formerly popular ideas that can now end your career: the belief that men and women have inherent psychological differences, the belief that marriage is between a man and a woman, opposition to affirmative action.

What's happening today is that certain ideas about gun rights, and maybe gun ownership itself, are being cast in the realm of the morally illegitimate and socially

unacceptable.

That's the importance of the corporate efforts to end N.R.A. affiliations. It's not about N.R.A. members saving some money when they fly. It's that they are not morally worthy of being among the affiliated groups. The idea is to stigmatize.

If progressives can cut what's left of the conservative movement off from mainstream society, they will fundamentally alter the culture war. We think of the culture war as this stagnant thing in which both sides scream at each other. But eventually there could be a winner. Progressives have won on most social issues. They could win on nearly everything else.

Continued school shootings could be just the thing that persuades the mainstream that conservatism is vulgar and socially illegitimate, somewhere between smoking and segregationism. If that kind of total victory is on offer for progressives, why should they take my advice and tone things down for the sake of a few small gun laws? The big prize here is not gun laws. It's winning the culture war, with the gunfight as the final battle.

The only thing I'd say to my progressive friends is, be careful how you win your victories. It is one thing to win by persuasion and another thing to win by elite cultural intimidation. Illiberalism breeds illiberalism. Using elite power, whether economic or cultural, to silence less educated foes usually produces a backlash.

Conservatives have zero cultural power, but they have immense political power. Even today, voters trust Republicans on the gun issue more than Democrats. If you exile 40 percent of the country from respectable society they will mount a political backlash that will make Donald Trump look like Adlai Stevenson.

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