
Tribalism in the Trump Era: The Societal Resilience Index

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Introduction

The era of President Donald Trump has magnified divisions in U.S. society on a level not seen since the Vietnam War and Civil Rights movement: exposing unfulfilled promises of the American Dream, stirring outrage over inequality and bias, and propelling scholars and policymakers to claim that democracy itself is dying. But is that true? How can we differentiate between a society under strain and a system on its deathbed – and is there anything that can be done to remedy the situation? In this brief article, we look beyond the U.S. president’s personality and policies to examine what we believe will be one of his administration’s most enduring influences on conflict scholarship: the resurgence of interest in tribalism and what to do about it. We propose a new measure, the *Societal Resilience Index*, as a basic metric from which social scientists can test for societal elasticity and which political activists can use to hone their efforts to promote societal resilience.

Tribalism in the Trump Era

Although the field of international conflict resolution has maintained a focus – perhaps even a preoccupation – on post-conflict societies and fragile states, recent waves of populism within democratic systems have awakened the world to the risks of tribalism in so-called “stable societies.” The political strife surrounding Trump’s election and presidency is not a unique occurrence but rather an illustrative example of the strains that tribalism can exert on modern democratic societies.

Tribalism dramatically affects the psychology of a populace. When a group enters this divisive mindset, they experience the “tribes effect”

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in which they view their relationship with the other side as oppositional, claim that legitimacy rests solely with their own perspective, and close off to learning about the other's point of view (Shapiro 2017). As the tribes effect infiltrates the psychology of an entire society, it threatens a core democratic practice: the ability to engage in political debate while still embracing a shared national identity. Differences in identity become the defining factor determining whom we support and whom we reject.

The pragmatic effects of tribalism on U.S. society are readily apparent. Public discourse is dominated by disagreement over what it means to be American and what the United States should stand for at the global level. Even neighborly conversations can quickly turn adversarial in the face of this political schism. No community in the United States is immune from the impact of tribalism, for it implicates everything from race to ethnicity, socioeconomic status to religion, geographic allegiance to partisan membership. The tribes effect turns virtually every political debate into a clash over national identity and moral judgment, with at least one side accusing the other of being un-American. Trump did not create these rifts but has repeatedly stoked flames of division throughout his candidacy and presidency. And the most controversial policies of his administration, around such issues as immigration and healthcare, have implicated existential concerns across party lines and seeped into a wide range of political disagreement, further exacerbating the tribes effect. In turn, the academic community has begun to acknowledge and explore these new strains of tribalism.

Societal Resilience: A Countermeasure to Tribalism

In response to the storm of modern tribalism, there has been a surge of scholarship examining how democracies backslide, deconsolidate, and die. But while social scientists have uncovered factors contributing to breakdowns in modern democracy, the field of conflict resolution can and should focus on those same variables as ingredients for building resilience against tribalism. A resilient system – like a bamboo – bends in the wind but does not break. What are the factors that can bolster a *resilient society* against a windstorm of tribalism?

We propose the *Societal Resilience Index* as a basic measure from which social scientists can test for democratic vitality. Each factor offers a window into the strength of the democratic system, while the overall index provides perspective on the system's broader resilience. As we have analyzed the impact of the Trump Era on the field of conflict resolution, we have sought to step outside the vertigo-inducing news cycle to identify *fundamentally system-eroding factors* – those social, political, and legal actions that create a sustained, deep threat

to a political system’s very existence. In other words, we have sought to identify those events that will interminably alter the fundamental structure of American democracy – ultimately in a quest to discern *fundamentally system-enhancing factors* that can serve as constructive levers of change. In reviewing the literature on democracy’s ostensible backslide or demise (e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2018), we have identified four broad indices that contribute to societal resilience or erosion:

1. *Cult of personality*: Does the executive leader of the political system prioritize the rule of law or personal power? Does the leader seek to operate within or outside the constraints of the democratic system? If the leader and democratic system collide, do political allies support the system or the leader?
2. *Politics and policies*: Are policies and political processes unifying or divisive? Do people embrace civil discourse or do they demonize policies that are not from their political “tribe”?
3. *National identity*: Do the diverse citizenry view themselves as part of a shared national identity? Do political leaders foster a unified national identity or cultivate division for political gain, even outside of election periods?
4. *Political institutions*: Do government institutions prioritize service to their autonomous systems for decision making or service to their leader?

Within each factor, researchers evaluating resilience must ask themselves two critical questions: does this dimension bias toward a particular tribe and amplify systemic erosion, or does it serve pluralistic

Table One
Societal Resilience Index: A Tool to Measure Democratic Vitality

	Tribalism vs. Societal Cohesion	Promotion of Resilience
Resilience Metric	<i>(Which is being amplified?)</i>	<i>(What can be done?)</i>
1. Cult of Personality		
2. Politics and Policies		
3. National Identity		
4. Institutions		

elements of society? And are there democratic methods for shifting from tribalism to communal principles? Table One depicts the key measures of this index and their utility as both a political measure and guide for corrective political action.

Effective application of the Societal Resilience Index will require substantial empirical research into trends toward resilience versus tribalism, which would include gathering data via such wide-ranging methods as polling; social psychological analysis of local, regional, and national partisanship; interviews of a broad, representative sample of political leaders and civil society; and analysis of relevant legal and political events. For the purposes of this brief article, we have chosen to highlight the resilience of political institutions, because the example of a unitary actor, the president, at odds with a single institutional principle is so clear. The other indices are more complex, encompassing hundreds if not millions of actors. Researchers who use our metric may disagree with our analysis – and we welcome that – because the purpose of the Societal Resilience Index is to provide standardized indicators from which to conduct systematic, evidence-based investigation of democratic elasticity.

Although the current political system is strained, our preliminary analysis suggests indications of resilience. The most substantial evidence rests in the largely autonomous operation of major political institutions, such as the Department of Justice and the federal court system. For example, as of this writing, the investigation into potential connections between Trump campaign associates and Russia's campaign of election interference has continued unabated since its inception more than two years ago as a counterintelligence investigation within the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – and, notably, despite repeated complaints from the Trump administration about a “witch hunt” and bias on the part of the Justice Department. The inquiry has since evolved into a criminal investigation under Special Counsel Robert Mueller.

Consider another poignant example of the resilience of democratic institutions. Seven days into President Trump's administration, he issued an executive order that, among other things, banned foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States for ninety days and suspended entry indefinitely of all Syrian refugees. The administration claimed the ban was in service of counterterrorism and national security, while opponents argued it was discriminatory and dangerous.

Almost immediately after the order went into effect, civil society organizations challenged the policy in federal court. In rapid succession, federal district courts in New York and Virginia enjoined particularly problematic aspects of the order (Shear, Kulish, and Feuer 2017),

and multiple lawsuits emerged on behalf of individuals and states. On February 3, 2017, a federal court in the state of Washington issued a national temporary restraining order on the majority of the ban, asserting that it violated the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Robart 2017). The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld the restraining order six days later.

The executive order fueled massive public outcry. Protestors at many international airports held signs decrying the ban and welcoming refugees and visitors, and lawyers flooded international terminals to offer legal assistance to affected families (Bromwich 2017). Even Democratic and Republican members of congress joined together to voice string opposition to the executive order. In a joint statement, Senator Lindsay Graham of South Carolina and the late Senator John McCain of Arizona, both prominent Republicans and advocates of national defense, called the order “a self-inflicted wound in the fight against terrorism” (McCain and Graham 2017).

Facing credible legal challenges, the administration was forced to revise its policy. While the revisions faced their own legal and political obstacles, this episode from extremely early in the Trump administration illustrates how using established democratic institutions – including the federal courts, public protest, and Congressional oversight – curtailed some of the president’s most tribalistic and antidemocratic impulses. While one might agree or disagree with the outcome, our aim is to call attention to the resilience of democratic institutions and processes in influencing that change.

Thus, unless Trump carries out some new controversial or destructive agenda that falls within the bounds of his constitutional authority, his legacy will be evaluated largely on the basis of his policies and divisive cult of personality, *but he will not break the seams of the nation*. Only a successful internal *coup d’etat* against institutional systems would do that, and the recent history of president–institutional negotiations presents evidence that this situation is unlikely to arise. In fact, during an interview in November 2017, Trump himself expressed a desire to violate institutional rules of the democratic game while also acknowledging constraints on his power. When asked about the Justice Department and the FBI, he responded: “But you know, the saddest thing is, because I am the president of the United States, I am not supposed to be involved with the Justice Department. I’m not supposed to be involved with the FBI. I’m not supposed to be doing the kind of things I would love to be doing and I am very frustrated by it” (Wittes 2017).

Trump has arguably departed from norms of public support for judicial independence; to use the words of our metric, he has sought, or at least desires, to have the judicial system and courts serve his tribal

purposes. He has not yet, however, converted those aspirations into full-fledged control over those institutions. Whether this pattern of breaking political norms will continue under a different administration is a topic of much debate among legal scholars (e.g. Goldsmith 2017; Eisen 2018).

To some degree, the resilience of a nation-state rests not only on institutional stability but on public confidence in the reliability and functional integrity of its institutions. In turn, public confidence in institutions rests to some degree on whether the other three metrics – cult of personality, political divisiveness, and national identity – are broadly tribal or communal. Public trust, therefore, will likely remain an issue. As polarizing rhetoric continues and institutional trust withers, tribalism risks worsening, leaving the United States more susceptible to democratic erosion. Thus, the future of a thriving democratic state rests in the careful discernment of its erosion and, more importantly, in the proactive promotion of societal resilience.

Conclusion

Given the rise of populism in the United States and around the world, it should come as no surprise that the field of conflict management must nuance its understanding of tribalism and the importance of institutional resilience. Threats to societal stability are at once inevitable and unpredictable, and human nature is likely to respond to threats with tribalism. To weather these storms, it is crucial for the field of conflict resolution to focus intensely on how to build resilience within democratic institutions. We hope that the Societal Resilience Index will highlight areas on which future scholars and practitioners can focus in times of strife *and* in times of relative calm. Future generations of conflict resolution scholars must focus not just on putting out fires but also on constructing buildings that can withstand the flames.

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