

The Empathy Deficit

By Ben Dubke

On January 6, 2021, a mob attacked the United States Capitol in an attempt to prevent the certification of the 2020 election results, breaching the Capitol for the first time since the British invasion in the War of 1812 (Holpuch, 2021). It was disappointing and discouraging, especially because many Americans recognized that the attack was not an isolated incident, but a reflection of a larger problem: Why do our presidential debates devolve into insults and name-calling? Why can we not just get along? Why do we hate each other? One central problem is a shortage of civil discourse. We need a renewal of empathy. If we truly recognized other points of view, we would not be so quick to vilify and demonize, and we could sincerely work together toward a more perfect union.

The Pew Research Center published a landmark report in 2017 addressing political polarization. The main headline was that the partisan gap in political values has widened greatly since 1994. Republicans had become more conservative and Democrats had become more liberal, as measured by responses to several policy questions (p. 1). This phenomenon is known as *ideological*

exposed to views outside his usual echo chamber, contrary to what would be expected if lack of exposure were causing ideological polarization (Bail et al. 2011). It appears that echo chambers are not as worrisome as many claim, but social media does tend to encourage sensationalist and inflammatory content, which seems to increase affective polarization, and, in turn, prevents civil discourse (Barberá, 2020, 46-47).

Our lack of civil discourse has several disturbing effects on society and government. Clearly, it undermines the goal of political discourse, the shared pursuit of truth. Instead of all participants working together to discover the truth, each only tries to win the argument by making the opponent look foolish with ad hominem attacks and straw man arguments. This also makes the political sphere unattractive to outsiders. A 2017 study revealed that 75% of Americans believe that incivility causes less political engagement, and 59% believe it discourages people from pursuing public service (Weber Shandwick, 2017, p. 11). Every person has a valuable contribution to make to our civil discourse, but many people hear the vitriol and outrage and are justifiably put off.

Our landscape of tribalism also encourages substandard leaders to rise to the top. When many of the moderating voices become disillusioned and leave the political conversation, candidates with more extreme, polarizing views become prevalent. Winning elections today is not accomplished by persuading voters from the other side, but rather by feeding the flames of outrage to energize the existing base. Whichever side loses often turns to an even more extreme ideology and more hardball methods to exert any remaining political power, a process documented in the United Kingdom following Brexit and the United States after the 2016 election (Maher, 2018). This situation is exactly what James Madison warned against in Federalist 10:

A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for preeminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good. (Madison, 1787, p. 79)

We are entrenched in our political factions, and whichever faction happens to gain power can enact a tyranny of the majority over the other. This is why we experience a pendulum swing of policy shifts when a new party gains control, and why so much governing is accomplished through executive action instead of legislation. A failure of civil discourse is a direct threat to our freedom as a society.

Faced with such a bleak picture, some might be tempted to abandon the political conversation altogether, but the solution to uncivil discourse is civil discourse, not no discourse at all. We need to rediscover the virtue of empathy and make a habit of exercising it in our political conversation. This means we must honestly consider the other point of view and always

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(1998, p. 139). To develop this habit, there are many models we can learn from, such as the great former Supreme Court justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Although they disagreed vehemently on many issues, they were close friends because they knew they were working together toward the common goals of justice and liberty. Like Justices Scalia and Ginsburg, we can resist the impulse toward enmity and replace it with empathy.

Christians have some special advantages when it comes to empathy. When we encounter any person, we know with confidence that God loves them by his blood, and that God wants them in heaven forever. These facts, not our political animosity, should govern our interactions. We should not speak harshly to anyone, and we should not speak harshly to anyone. We should rather say, the insults we would rather hurl, and the tragedy we would rather experience.

Bibliography

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