

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 our country's decaying political health. Why does our country suffer from violent political extremists? 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 fail to see others' perspectives and enter political conversations to win battles rather than seek the truth. 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 polarization*. Some degree of ideological polarization can actually enhance civil discourse because ideological diversity encourages civil engagement and innovative solutions (Barberá, 2020, p. 47). More worryingly, the Pew report also found an increase in *affective polarization*, feelings of distrust and dislike for members of the opposing perspective:

As Republicans and Democrats have moved further apart on political values and issues, there has been an accompanying increase in the level of negative sentiment that they direct toward the opposing party... Among members of both parties, the shares with *very* unfavorable opinions of the other party have more than doubled since 1994. (Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 65)

Not only do Americans hold more disparate political perspectives, but many disagreements also produce visceral emotional reactions against those who hold the opposite view. Affective polarization impairs civil discourse because angry, impulsive responses keep us from thoughtful debate.

Many people think social media is a significant part of the problem. The theory is that social media users are siloed into online echo chambers where they only digest information that reinforces their viewpoint, never being exposed to arguments supporting the alternative. The observed effects of social media on political interactions are more complex, however. Pablo Barberá, a computational political scientist at USC, analyzed the existing research on social media and political interactions, and he found that the evidence challenges the idea that echo chambers restrict people to hearing a single political perspective (2020). He summarizes, "The review of the literature on social media and 'echo chambers' has shown that, rather counterintuitively, there is convincing empirical evidence demonstrating that social networking sites increase the range of political views to which individuals are exposed" (p. 44). One study even indicates that a social media user's political opinions could become more extreme when

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., 2018). 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, p. 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 one 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 more 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 pre-eminence 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 co-operate for their common good. (Madison, 1961, 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 argue against the idea, not the person who holds it. Stephen L. Carter explains, “Civility requires that we listen to others with knowledge of the possibility that they are right and we are wrong”

(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 they are created in God's image, that Jesus paid for them by his blood, and that God wants them in heaven forever. These facts, not our political differences, should define our perception of others. Carter frames empathy as a sacrifice: "The project of constructing civility will also require all of us to surrender some of our desires ... For civility *is* sacrifice" (1998, p. 103). For the sake of civility, we must sacrifice the words we would rather say, the insults we would rather hurl, and the outrage we would rather experience. When we love our political neighbor in this way, we follow our Lord's sacrificial example.

On the one hand, the solution to our civil discourse crisis is incredibly simple. We need to listen to each other honestly, learn from other perspectives, and approach political discussions with willingness to have our minds changed. Our loyalty to the truth and the greater good must win out over our pride and stubbornness that our way is always right. On the other hand, the problem is immense, and these principles are difficult to implement in practice. It seems like some people will always refuse to sincerely engage in civil discourse, and that we need to stoop to their level to make any difference. But to rebuild an empathetic culture of civil discourse, someone must humble himself and make the first move. Christians are well-equipped by Christ's sacrificial example and specifically called to make this contribution. The civil discourse crisis should not discourage us or press us to cynicism. Rather, this moment presents an opportunity to heal our political divisions, restore confidence in American institutions, and demonstrate the transformative love of Christ.

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