

Political Division



Hebrews 5.1 "Every ~~high~~ priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf . . . He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and (the) wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of (his) people."

Our Election Day in this country is less than three weeks away now, and I feel the need to talk about the deep political division in our nation, one which will not simply disappear

after the election, regardless of which side wins. For when it comes to politics in this country, many Americans sadly feel an ever-increasing contempt for the other side. The problem lies not only in how we feel about them, but also, I think, because of errors in our thinking about them. Recognizing this reality offers, I believe, a key to how we might rediscover common ground between the sides and de-escalate the conflict in our nation.

Stanford University facilitated an important study about the nature of conflict between the differing parties. There they considered Ben and Emily, for example. They both live in the same state and belong to the same race, economic class, and generation. And yet they don't agree on much of anything it would appear. Ben is a Republican who owns two guns. "There are a lot of crazies out there," he explained to Emily. And Emily is a Democrat who despises firearms, and who replied, "Yeah, a lot of crazy people own guns." Their fraught conversation resembled so many in this polarized moment of our nation --- until suddenly it didn't. Within minutes, with no prompting from the staff, the two began opening up about their stories. Emily's husband once in an argument had a gun pulled on him, which greatly frightened her. Ben is a gay man living in a conservative town; and after receiving several threatening messages, he felt he needed protection.

Ben and Emily (whose names have been changed to preserve their privacy) were among more than 160 Americans who spoke about their opposing political views as part of this experiment at Stanford. Over and over again, the staff observed participants with rival opinions, who came to these conversations ready for battle --- but who left feeling changed. Afterwards, the participants reported feeling less hostile toward the other party and less pretentious in their own views. When asked to rate the pleasantness of these dialogues, the most common response was 100, on a 100-point scale.

If this surprises you, you're in good company. Americans whom they surveyed believed that conversations like the one between Ben and Emily would be a waste of time, or even counterproductive. One wrote that, when it comes to politics, "respectful disagreement is dead." And Ben and Emily were similarly pessimistic themselves about these kinds of conversations --- and thus shocked by how much they enjoyed one another and learned from their time together.

The sad irony is that even when our pessimism is misplaced, it can create cycles of silence and misunderstanding that only worsen the division among us. But this also points to a way forward. Our errors in political judgment mimic the patterns of thought among depressed people, meaning that we might "treat"

these political habits of mind, the same way we treat depression --- with strategies from cognitive therapy.

Sixty years ago, a psychiatrist Aaron Beck transformed our understanding of mental illness. For years and years and years, depression had been seen as an illness of feeling, that depression was an immovable sadness, an emotion not easily altered. Beck saw that depression is also a pattern of thought. Depressed patients, he observed, often drew sweepingly bleak conclusions about the world and about themselves based on very little evidence, which Beck called "cognitive distortions." Patients then acted out on those thoughts in ways that only worsened their problems. Someone who is sure his friends hate him, might decline an invitation to a party, for example, thus deepening his own personal isolation, and reinforcing his views that others hate him.

Beck used his theory to create cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), now a leading psychological intervention, which challenges these 'cognitive distortions'. If a patient thinks no one likes him, a therapist might ask what evidence he has for that conclusion. The patient might also be encouraged to collect more perspective about that conclusion, perhaps by asking some of his friends out for coffee. If even only one friend takes him up on the invitation, he might still revise his assumptions about how other people feel about him as a result.

'Cognitive distortions' now simply litter our political landscape these days. Americans of each party hold breathtakingly warped impressions of the other side, though they don't really believe that themselves. In their study, Stanford asked Republican and Democratic voters how much they supported antidemocratic practices, for example, --- such as gerrymandering and the security of election results --- and how they thought an average supporter of the opposing party would feel about those same practices. Most people on each side supported fair and free democracy, but didn't realize that their rivals on the other side did as well. Participants estimated that the other side was nearly twice as antidemocratic as they really were. In other research, both Democrats and Republicans estimate those of the other party to be more extreme, more hateful, and violent than they are in reality. These are simply 'cognitive distortions.'

These results are, however, not surprising. Political and media "conflict entrepreneurs," who profit when fear and contempt overrun our public conversations, thus feed us terrifying depictions of our rivals as bloodthirsty monsters who want to burn our nation to the ground. Cable news and social media platforms feed us systematically biased information, warping our perceptions even further. Like cognitive distortions

in depression, political distortions bleed into our thoughts and actions and only make things worse, in at least two ways.

The first distortion is called *unpopular escalation*. In this Stanford study, participants who believed that rivals would bend democratic rules for their own gain, thought their own party should do the same. Why honor rules of engagement if you think the enemy won't honor them? Likewise, people who overestimate the other side's hatred and violence grew more willing themselves to hate and to harm others as well. Our false assumptions escalate the conflict between sides. This is called *unpopular escalation*.

The second distortion is *consensus neglect*. Yes, there are violent extremists who actually threaten our nation. But they are a very tiny minority. In this study, they found that more than 80 percent of Americans regret the country's division and wish for greater cooperation, more than 80%! In recent surveys, Republicans and Democrats overwhelmingly agree on other core values, such as voting rights and freedom of religion, facilitating immigration for skilled workers, upholding Medicare, and tightening gun laws.

Voters have much more in common than we acknowledge. Conversations such as Ben and Emily's could help uncover those shared values between sides, but hardly anyone of us engage in those kind of conversations with the other side. This avoidance

leaves us little chance to correct our own distorted views. Common ground thus remains an undiscovered country.

Cognitive distortions and their effects are a tragedy for this country, but they are also an opportunity. A Cognitive Behavioral Therapy perspective on addressing our political divisions could start by challenging people's assumptions, by challenging our assumptions, about what we think we know, about what we think the other side believes. Stanford tried this in their study. After some people guessed how antidemocratic their rivals were, they were shown the data – that most on the other side support democratic norms. Those who learned this, responded by more fiercely defending democracy themselves, now knowing they were not alone in this fight, that there was shared common ground between them. Other researchers recently showed people that thought the vast majority of their rivals preferred violence over peace, and again, when shown the data, the other side was surprised.

The study challenges people, the study challenges us, to think differently and to act differently by simply collecting new data ourselves, by talking to those on the other side. In a divided America, this could mean braving conversations across the divide, the way Ben and Emily did. Research offers hints about how to make these conversations productive. Good *disagrees* don't need to hide their own perspective, but they

also need to express genuine curiosity about the others' political views, and then point out common ground when they see it. They share personal stories and ask about each other's experiences, not combatively, but curiously, without self-assuredness or self-righteousness, truly trying to understand the other's point of view. Such conversations, I tell you, respect the dignity of every human being. This type of exchange isn't just nice – it's personally very powerful. In this study, they found that people who empathize during disagreement are better able to persuade others and find common ground. If we want someone else to open their mind, a great place to start is opening ours first.

Yet if you're like most people, you belong to an exhausted majority, simply tired of all the fighting and the division, just trying to tune it all out. You probably want greater cooperation, peace, and freedom, in our conversations, but you also might think that the people you disagree with, want the opposite, and that political disaster is just inevitable. These scientists treat this despair, not by lying to people, but by telling them the truth.

As long as we let conflict entrepreneurs guide us, we as Americans will end up loathing each other, escalating and giving up hope for anything better. If we instead follow the data, we can realize that the great majority of Americans do want

something different, something better. And a more hopeful future can come into focus for us all, where we love our neighbors as ourselves, and thus allowing us to then strive for justice and peace among all people! Amen.