Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion How the psychology of political division could lead us out of it

Studies suggest that people who empathize during disagreement are better able to persuade others.

7 min 344

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When it comes to politics, many Americans feel increasing contempt for the other side. The problem lies not only in how we feel but also with errors in our thinking. Recognizing this reality offers a key to how we might rediscover common ground and de-escalate conflict.

Consider Ben and Emily. They live in the same state and belong to the same race, economic class and generation. Yet they don't agree on much.

Ben is a Republican who owns two guns. "There are a lot of crazies out there," he explained to Emily in a video conversation our Stanford laboratory facilitated. "A lot of crazy people own guns," countered Emily, a Democrat who despises firearms.

Their fraught conversation resembled so many in this polarized moment — until it didn't. Within minutes, with no prompting from our staff, the two began opening up about their stories. Emily's husband once had a gun pulled on him in an argument. Ben is a gay man living in a conservative town; after receiving 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 an experiment we ran at Stanford. Over and over, we observed as participants with rival opinions came to these conversations ready for combat — and left feeling changed. Afterward, they reported feeling less hostile toward the other party and more humble 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. The Americans we 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." Ben and Emily were similarly pessimistic — 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 creates cycles of silence and misunderstanding that worsen division. But this also points to a way forward. Errors in political judgment mimic the patterns of thought among depressed people, meaning that we might "treat" these habits of mind the same way we treat depression — with strategies from cognitive therapy.

Sixty years ago, psychiatrist Aaron Beck transformed our understanding of mental illness. For years, depression had been seen as an illness of feeling, an immovable sadness. Beck saw that it is also a pattern of thought. Depressed patients often drew sweepingly bleak conclusions based on little evidence, which Beck called "cognitive distortions." Patients then acted on these thoughts in ways that worsened their problems. Someone who is sure his friends hate him might decline an invitation to a party, thus deepening his isolation.

Beck used his theory to create cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), now a leading psychological intervention, which challenges 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 data, perhaps by asking some friends out for coffee. If even one takes him up on it, he can revise his assumptions about how others feel.

Cognitive distortions litter our political landscape. Americans of each party hold breathtakingly warped impressions of the other side. In our study, we asked Republican and Democratic voters how much they supported antidemocratic practices — such as gerrymandering and the denial 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 support fair and free democracy but don't realize their rivals do as well: Participants estimated that the other side was nearly twice as antidemocratic as they really are. In other research, both Democrats and Republicans estimate those of the other party to be more extreme, hateful and violent than the reality.

These results are unsurprising. Political and media "conflict entrepreneurs," who profit when fear and contempt overrun public conversations, 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 promote systematically biased information, warping our perceptions.

Like cognitive distortions in depression, political misperceptions bleed into our actions and make things worse, in at least two ways.

The first is *unpopular escalation*. In our 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 the enemy won't? Likewise, people who overestimate the other side's hatred and violence grow more willing to hate and harm, as well.

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

Voters have more in common than we realize. Conversations such as Ben and Emily's could help uncover those shared values, but hardly anyone has them. This avoidance leaves us little chance to correct our distorted views. Common ground remains an undiscovered country.

Cognitive distortions and their effects are a tragedy, but also an opportunity. A CBT perspective on addressing division could start by challenging people's assumptions. We tried this in our lab. After some people guessed how antidemocratic their rivals were, we showed them 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. Other researchers recently taught people that the vast majority of their rivals preferred peace to violence, and again, participants followed suit.

In CBT, people are challenged to think differently and act differently by collecting new data themselves. In a divided America, this could mean braving conversations across difference, the way Ben and Emily did.

Research offers hints about how to make these conversations productive. Good disagreers don't hide their own perspective, but they also express genuine curiosity about others' views and point out common ground when they see it. They share personal stories and ask about each other's experiences. This type of exchange isn't just nice — it's powerful. In our work, we find that people who empathize during disagreement are better able to persuade others. If you want someone else to open their mind, a great place to start is opening yours first.

If you're like most people, you belong to an exhausted majority. You probably want greater cooperation, peace and freedom. You also might think that the people you disagree with want the opposite, and that political disaster is inevitable. Scientists like us treat this despair not by lying to people, but by telling them the truth.

As long as we let conflict entrepreneurs guide us, we will loathe each other, escalate and give up on anything better. If we instead follow the data, we can realize that the great majority of Americans want something better. A more hopeful future can come into focus.