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Healing the political divide

How did we become such a divided nation, and how can psychologists help us bridge the gap?

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With votes now tallied, and in some cases, electoral outcomes having been determined by extremely narrow margins and marked by legal challenges, there is no doubt that the political divide in the United States is a central trait of the country. And as this divide seems likely to continue to grow, for many of us it feels uncrossable. Yet psychological science suggests that it is both possible and imperative for members of our society to find common ground.

What is actually going on?

To decrease the political divide, we must understand the various factors that work to divide us. One thing we can do right now as individuals is pause and consider our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and identify the psychological factors at play. The ability to place our own behaviors and the behaviors of others into a psychological framework can allow us to reflect on what we are experiencing and help us to understand and shape our actions.

“Existential fear appears to be at the heart of what drives polarization,” says Kirk Schneider, PhD, adjunct faculty at Saybrook University in California and Teachers College, Columbia University in New York.

“One reason we tend to become fixated and polarized is because of individual and collective trauma that associates with a profound sense of insignificance,” says Schneider. In this state, people may feel that they don’t matter and fear “ultimately being wiped away or extinguished,” he adds (*The polarized mind: Why it’s killing us and what we can do about it*, 2013, University Professors Press).

And if existential fear is indeed a root of polarization, our sometimes-warped view of the other side can perpetuate it.

“Some of this divide is a matter of perception,” says Tania Israel, PhD, professor of counseling psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author of *Beyond Your Bubble*, a book about connecting across the political divide. “Most people are not on the extremes of any of these issues, but most of what we hear is from people who are more on the extremes.” (More in Common, 2018 (https://hiddentribes.us/) ; More in Common, 2019 (https://perceptiongap.us/))

In other words, people have a natural tendency to conceptualize everyone on the other side of the political spectrum as if they were the same as the leaders and spokespeople of that side.

“[Leaders] can be very effective at creating and strengthening ‘mutual radicalization,’” says Fathali Moghaddam, PhD, using a term he coined to describe the growth of two opposing sides toward more and more extreme stances. Moghaddam, a professor and director of the Interdisciplinary Program in Cognitive Science at Georgetown University and author of the book *Mutual Radicalization*, says that it's important to also recognize that certain forms of leadership foment and thrive on extreme polarization.

"If that kind of leadership wins out," says Moghaddam, "then you're going to have further mutual radicalization and further polarization and further irrationality in society," a point demonstrated in his book through case studies of extremists on the political left and right, and radical White nationalists and Islamic Jihadists.

Knowing that the political divide we are experiencing may be due, in part, to our own feelings of fear and misperceptions about others and seeing that those thoughts and feelings can be inflamed by political leaders gives us the ability to better understand how we've gotten to where we are. But there is a lot of work to be done to bring people together. Behavioral research can also provide insights into how to bridge the political divide.

Approaching the divide

"Research indicates that the divisiveness will continue to grow if fear of the other and the wounds fueling that fear are not addressed," says Schneider.

One way to mitigate the divisiveness is to physically bring people together in safe, highly structured dialogue groups, as Schneider elaborates in his most recent book *The Depolarizing of America: A Guidebook for Social Healing*. Over the past 15 years, he has developed and participated in dialogue groups and the outcomes are promising. He notes that post-workshop surveys among 1,800 participants in a dialogue organization called Braver Angels found that about 79% of the participants felt that they better understood "the experiences, feelings, and beliefs of those on the other side," and that they, in turn, felt better understood. About 75% of participants felt less angry and less estranged toward those on the other side following the workshops, and about 80% felt that they were "more able to start constructive conversations" with them (Braver Angels, 2018 (https://braverangels.org/evaluation/)).

There are also opportunities to reach out to the other side in our existing relationships.

Jeanne Safer, PhD, a psychotherapist for over 45 years, author of the book *I Love You, But I Hate Your Politics*, and host of a podcast by the same name, reminds us that things aren't as black and white as they may sometimes seem. “No matter a person's politics, there are gray areas in all sides of the spectrum,” says Safer.

And she should understand this as well as anybody—she describes herself as “a die-hard liberal happily married to a stalwart conservative” for 40 years. While writing her book, Safer interviewed 50 politically mixed couples and discovered several helpful insights. Chiefly, says Safer, we must focus on our shared core values.

We must also let go of our tendencies to want to bring someone to our own side of the political divide. “People are married to the notion that they can change minds—this almost always isn't true,” says Safer.

Furthermore, she reminds us that we don't always have to be drawn into an argument. “Sometimes it's perfectly fine to just walk away,” says Safer.

In our personal relationships, Tania Israel stresses to keep in mind our own sometimes-faulty perceptions of the other side. “Don't make assumptions about someone based on their vote. Instead, I encourage people to be curious about what their vote meant to them. That's an opportunity to open up a conversation to learn more about people that are important to us.”

Israel urges that “curiosity and respect for someone else's views are the foundation” for bridging the political divide (*Intellectual humility in public discourse* (https://humilityandconviction.uconn.edu/blank/what-is-intellectual-humility) , University of Connecticut Humanities Institute).

She also cautions that social media limits our ability to have effective conversations. On social media, says Israel, “people feel like they're having conversations with people, but they're not really interacting as full human beings.” She recommends that we should be having political conversations “face-to-face rather than Facebook-to-Facebook.”

Concentrating on face-to-face, mutually respectful, and curious conversations can work, even in seemingly hopeless situations. Qasim Rashid, a democratic candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in Virginia experienced this firsthand during his campaign. While hosting a rally in late October, protesters arrived to disrupt the event. Rather than ignoring them or asking them to leave, he invited the other side into conversation.

“Everyone I talked to had different reasons they were supporting my opposition, but we were able to have honest, open conversations,” says Rashid. “That’s given me a lot of hope that people on both sides are willing to listen, even in this time of extreme polarization.”

Moghaddam’s work on the psychological foundations of democracy and dictatorship emphasizes the need for conversations like the one at Rashid’s rally. He urges going “beyond name calling and trying to understand the other side without being disdainful and oppressive against the other side.”

“And this goes for both sides,” he stresses, “It’s a matter of Democrats and Republicans really looking at one another and recognizing that we have superordinate goals that need to be achieved—goals that both sides desire, but neither side can achieve without the active cooperation of the other side.”

Moghaddam also reminds us that conducting mutually respectful conversations across the divide becomes much easier under leadership that “identifies superordinate goals in a cooperative way.”

How do psychologists help?

Psychologists, whether scientists, clinicians, educators, or otherwise, have a particular expertise they can apply to bridging the political divide.

One way psychologists can reach people directly is by working with organizations that facilitate research and dialogue such as Braver Angels (https://braverangels.org/) and the National Institute for Civil Discourse (https://nicd.arizona.edu/) . Many of these groups offer supportive, highly structured programming aimed at helping people learn about and understand one another as opposed to persuading or imposing one's views on the other side.

"This step alone is psychosocially valuable because it promotes discovery and an enlarged capacity for human civility. But it also tends to be a cornerstone for enhancing the likelihood of conflicting parties to find common ground," says Schneider. "This is because it creates conditions for empathy and resonance between the parties, that likely would not even be given a chance in the absence of such supportive and structured formats."

But not every American will be willing to participate in a dialogue group, especially those on the fringes of the political continuum. To achieve even greater public impact, psychologists must look to systemic changes.

Public education, for example, is a way psychologists may contribute, says Moghaddam. "Because mutual radicalization is mostly an irrational and emotional collective process, individuals are not necessarily aware of what is pushing them to more and more extreme positions," he says, and being cognizant of the underpinnings of emotions and behavior can go a long way to effecting change on an individual level.

Scientists must strive to share their research as broadly as possible. And they don't have to do it alone. Organizations like More in Common (https://www.moreincommon.com/) work to conduct research and communicate findings to audiences where it can have the greatest impact.

Advocacy is essential as well. Other countries that have made strides in addressing the political divide relied heavily on government-led reconciliation efforts. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/) , for example, in South Africa, has been fundamental in addressing disparities and conflict around Apartheid.

Were the United States to consider similar, government-backed efforts, psychologists must be part of the call to do so. And the behavioral expertise of the field would be central to success.

"The collective mental health of the nation is at risk," says Moghaddam. "Just as we should rely on epidemiological science to tell us when there is a vaccine ready for mass use, we have to rely on psychological science to guide us through these mental health issues."

And following an election that, for many, has felt like the most polarized of a lifetime, this piece seems critical. "This is what our profession is all about," says Moghaddam.

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