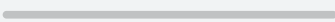






Speaking of Psychology: How politics became so uncivilized

Episode 43

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Political elections ought to bring out the good in people – aren't they a chance to talk about plans and hopes for the future? But lately they have come to resemble brawls on a playground. When did it become OK to wave insulting signs at rallies or call candidates ugly names? Why are so many candidates focusing on the personal instead of policy? In this episode, Jonathan Haidt, PhD, talks about incivility in politics and how psychological research can help us understand each other a little better and return civility to politics.

About the expert: Jonathan Haidt, PhD



Jonathan Haidt, PhD, is a social psychologist at the New York University Stern School of Business. His research examines the intuitive foundations of morality and how morality varies across cultures, including the cultures of American progressives, conservatives and libertarians. Haidt is the author of “[The Happiness Hypothesis](http://www.happinesshypothesis.com/),” and of The New York Times bestseller “[The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion](http://righteousmind.com/).” At NYU, he is applying his research on moral psychology to business ethics, asking how companies can structure and run themselves in ways that will be resistant to ethical failures.

Transcript

Audrey Hamilton: Many Americans feel they are embattled in a culture war that is not only dividing them, but stressing them out. An American Psychological Association survey showed that 52 percent of American adults report that the 2016 election is a significant source of stress. This type of stress could be largely related to people's

differing views on what is fact and what is moral. In this episode, we speak with a psychologist about how scientific research into how people think and behave can help us understand how we became so divided and how we can come back together. I'm Audrey Hamilton and this is Speaking of Psychology.

Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business. His research has focused on the moral foundations of politics and on ways to transcend the culture wars by using recent discoveries in moral psychology to foster more civil forms of politics. He is the author of "The Happiness Hypothesis" and of the New York Times bestseller "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion." Welcome, Dr. Haidt.

Jonathan Haidt: Thank you Audrey. It's a pleasure to be here.

Audrey Hamilton: Civility in politics. That sounds like a pipe dream in a presidential election year. What do you mean by a civil form of politics?

Jonathan Haidt: People are very good at relating to each other in different ways. We're extremely good at adversarial forms and attacking each other, being lawyers and fighting. And we're also really good at cooperating and working together or courting each other. So we can easily shift back and forth into different modes. I co-run a group called [Civilpolitics.org](http://www.Civilpolitics.org/) (<http://www.Civilpolitics.org/>) where we're trying to promote civil political talk. And here's what we say at the site. We say "civility as we pursue it is the ability to disagree productively with others, respecting their sincerity and decency." And that's the key, the sincerity and decency thing.

When you're talking with people and arguing and disagreeing with them, that's fine, that's great. That's what politics is supposed to be. But when what you're saying is aimed at discrediting their sincerity and decency, not rebutting their arguments, but saying "yeah, you're just saying that because you're bribed by the Koch brothers." Or you know, "you're a fascist, you're a racist." Those aren't real arguments. Those are attempts to discredit the other. So, that's the more adversarial, confrontational, zero sum, or you might even say negative sum – the more I can hurt you, the better I am. And that's what our politics has descended more into than it used to be.

Audrey Hamilton: Well, it does seem like the divisiveness has reached a point where there's no turning back. But you're saying that psychology and other social sciences can help us understand where we are, how we got here and how to change. Can you talk to us about that?

Jonathan Haidt: Well sure, because there's no such thing as no turning back. I mean, things were really, really bad. I think the days of the federalists and anti-federalists and the founding fathers, even Thomas Jefferson and others, were making up pen names and so they got to attack each other and honestly, like being trolls on the Internet almost. And the Civil War was of course, much worse than things are today. So, things do go in cycles. Now things are at a low point. They've not been this bad since I think the 19th century. So there is turning back, but it's going to be tough. There are a lot of trends that are pushing us this way now.

Audrey Hamilton: What role does the popularity of social media, Facebook, 24-hour news channels constantly putting out pundits to say this and you say that – what do they play in this divisiveness?

Jonathan Haidt: Sam Abrams, who is a political scientist, he and I wrote an essay in The Washington Post last year in which we described the ten major trends that have made our politics so polarized and dysfunctional. The number one is the purification of the parties. So we didn't used to have a clear conservative party and a clear progressive party. There was a left and right wing of both parties up until really the 1970s. But once after President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act and that made the conservative Democrats leave in the south especially, leave the Democratic Party and join the Republican Party.

Audrey Hamilton: In 1964?

Jonathan Haidt: In 1964, that's right. So that starts these tectonic plates shifting, which gives us a purified liberal, progressive party and a purified conservative party. And so that really begins to take shape in the 1980s and by the 90s it's complete.

Right, so you asked me about social media, well this is the back story to it. Once you have these purified parties then that happens at the same time as this media revolution

where you've got cable TV and the Internet. So that now, the media that people consume is all confirmatory. Everybody can tune into things that support their world view. So those two trends interact to give us this perfect storm where everyone is now totally convinced not just that they're right, but that the other side is racist or fascist or funded by the Kochs or whatever it is.

So yeah, it's real bad. I was talking with somebody at the APA convention about this the other day and we kind of worked up the metaphor – it's like if you go back – social media to me is like this technology that we're just not, we're not adapted for. We're not used to yet. So it's like imagine if you go back 50,000 years and humans are just leaving Africa and we have spear technology. We've had spears for about a half million years. You know, we kind of know how to kill each other with spears but we also know how to get along when there's all of these spears around. So we've been living with spears for half a million years. But suddenly, some malevolent other species from another planet drops loaded handguns all over the world. So you get this spear technology people and suddenly everybody's got loaded handguns. Like what, what are these things? You pull the trigger and the other guy's dead. Wow, this is great. There'd be a lot of killing. Eventually we presume, they'd work out norms for how to live with handguns but it would take a while. That's where we are with social media. We all really care about our reputations and we suddenly have this technology that allows us to slander anyone else instantly to draw a mob. So, what's happened is people are really, really afraid. I see this on college campuses. People are so afraid to stand up, stand out, say anything, unless it's with the mob. If the mob is on their side, then they are so vocal and self-righteous.

But what I'm finding is that even moderates or centrists – people who are not political – are afraid to speak up and challenge the left because they'll get crucified.

Audrey Hamilton: Right. An Associated Press poll last year found that Republican voters want their Congressional leaders to stick to conservative principles while Democrats favor compromise. And there are many more differences between the two parties. Your expertise is in moral psychology, which is kind of a broad term encompassing ethics, psychology and philosophy. Can you talk about how psychology can help us explain these differences?

Jonathan Haidt: Oh sure. It's been a major area of research for a lot of people. If you want to understand left right differences, some of it is true asymmetry that is people on the left psychologically are different from people on the right. And the most consistent difference is that the people on the left are higher on openness to experience. They enjoy variety and diversity. And then they are a little lower on conscientiousness. Put this all together and what you get is people on the left are more interested in immigration, diversity, variety. Research by Sam Gosling at UT Austin shows that if you look at the dorm rooms of people – he did a study at Berkeley – you go into people's dorm rooms when they are not there. They give you permission to go in. You just take photographs. You code things. And then you show those to other students to just rate. Do you think this person's liberal or conservative? People can tell. Liberals are less organized. They have more high style. They have fewer calendars. Conservatives are more organized, responsible. Their music and books are from a narrower range. So there are psychological differences. Neither one is good or bad, but it does help explain why they differ on issues of immigration and nationalism, patriotism -- all of those sorts of things.

So you start with those and that means that people who are born with a certain personality – as they grow up, they're going to find right-wing or left-wing ideas more congenial. Our genes don't predestine us to be on one side, but they make one side or another more likely. So there's a lot of interesting research on personality and politics.

Then the next thing you have to bring in is group dynamics. So you get these two groups fighting it out and your question was about issues of compromise. Well, yes it's true that right now the word compromise is a dirty word for Republicans and there was some funny episodes about five years ago a lot of us remember when I forget which journalist was trying to get John Boehner to say the word compromise. He wouldn't say it because he knows that if he in any way endorsed compromise his people would consider him a traitor.

So, is it that the right is more closed minded and against compromise? It depends a lot on which side feels more embattled; which side feels it's being crushed; which side is more self-righteous. So that can shift. That can go back and forth. There is also the interesting difference that in studies of dilemmas of you know, would you push a man off a bridge, one man, to save the lives of five? There's some research showing that

conservatives are more deontological. That means they go more with absolute rules and principals, like no, you don't kill someone. You don't push someone off the bridge. So, it is possible that people on the right are more principled in the sense of "these are the rules, you don't break them," whereas people on the left are more like "well, you've got to look at the outcomes, do all of these tradeoffs." So in that case, I don't know for sure whether it's truly that the right is more opposed to compromise. You have to look at all of these different factors.

Audrey Hamilton: So how can we use psychology to reduce the intensity of these conflicts? I mean like you say, we're always going to have them. There's always going to be some differences and conflict between. But, how do we reduce the intensity of it?

Jonathan Haidt: Yeah, well this is where social psychology can be so helpful because one of the great – one of the great psychological aphorisms or quotations there's a Bedouin proverb that says "me against my brother. Me and my brother against our cousin. And me, my brother and cousin against the stranger." So, we're tribal. We're tribal creatures. And it used to be in American politics that they would say politics ends at the water's edge. Sure, we can fight it out – you know, Democrat, Republican. But as soon as there's a foreign policy issue, we stop that and we're united. And that was the case when I was a kid. You heard that a lot. But beginning in the 90s that stopped being the case. Now, it's basically me and my brother against our cousin and we don't care what else is happening. We just hate the cousin and a matter of who we're being attacked by. We're going to focus on fighting the cousin.

So our partisanship is kind of stuck. But there's a lot you can do to move things around. Because in addition to being tribal, humans are also really cooperative and we're really good at trade. Our ancestors were really good at leading their tribe and going out and finding other groups to exchange with.

So, there's a lot of hope. One of the most consistent findings in social psychology is that when you give groups a superordinate threat or goal – some project to work on together – they tend to drop the tribalism and work together.

I was very fortunate to be involved with a group. I was able to moderate a group of poverty experts. Some of the top experts on the right and left on poverty and in our first

few meetings we worked for about a year – 2015 – we worked for a year together. And in our first few meetings it was really clear there was the left team and the right team and the left team was really focused on economic causes of poverty and structural problems of racism and the right was really focused on family breakdown. And the need for order and discipline and self-control and delay of gratification. At first it was really clear well, you know, both sides are actually right. And we just have to figure out a way that we can incorporate all of their insights into the final report. What was most thrilling was that by the end of this year-long process, there wasn't a right team or a left team anymore. At one of our last meetings, I gave the groups the option of caucusing separately. You know, we had these final recommendations and okay, do you guys need to talk separately to be sure you endorse these? And they said, no, let's talk about it all together. They really had a sense of we've been working on this thing for a year. We've come so far. We have a great set of recommendations. So, it can take some time, but if you foster relationships and a sense of common or shared group identity with a common goal or project, you can break down the tribalism.

Audrey Hamilton: Switching gears a little bit to the field of psychology. What have you learned about the political leanings of psychologists themselves and how does that affect the field's viewpoint on politically controversial topics?

Jonathan Haidt: Oh my. Well, so what's been happening to our country since the 90s or so is that it's almost like a gigantic electromagnet with a positive pull and a negative pull pulling us apart. And we're seeing whole – we're seeing religious denominations splitting over this into the more left wing Episcopalians and the right wing Episcopalians. That's been happening in universities. Universities have leaned left for more than a hundred years. And that's not really a problem in my view. We don't have to have 50/50 parity in everything. What we must have in the sciences – we must have the certainty that ideas will be critiqued. So if somebody says something that's you know very sort of left, it pleases the left, it's got to be the case that someone will stand up and say well wait a second, you're making this assumption. Somebody has to be there to say that. So until the 90s, there were some people around who were not on the left.

What's happened in psychology and in the social sciences more broadly and it happened in humanities is they shifted from being on the left or leaning left two or three or one to leaning left ten to one, 20 to one -- on some measures 30 or 40 to one, which

means that you will never find someone who's not on the left. Or rather, there are a few, but they don't dare speak up. Even the centrists – what I find is even in surveys the people who say I'm not on the right, I'm in the middle. Are you willing to speak up and challenge things when they are politically controversial? No, no, it's just too dangerous.

So, the social sciences I think are breaking down. Not entirely, but on politicized topics. If we're talking about race, gender, immigration, inequality. Whatever the favorite topics are, I think the research coming out is just not – well individual research projects may be very good but the overall output is really tilted and a lot of ideas are there because they're politically pleasing, not because they're empirically supported. It's a huge problem. And that's why I started a group with some friends of mine called [HeterodoxAcademy.org](http://www.HeterodoxAcademy.org) (<http://www.HeterodoxAcademy.org>). I urge listeners to go check it out. We make the case that the academy needs more viewpoint diversity. Diversity is a good thing. But the most important kind of diversity is viewpoint diversity. You have to have people who actually think differently. Just to have people of a different race or sex doesn't help your thinking, unless they think differently. And we've been so focused on those demographic diversity kind of things, that it's actually made the viewpoint diversity issue even harder because when everyone's focused on race and gender diversity, they're almost all on the left and they see conservatives as the enemy – as they're racists or sexists – we don't want them here. And this is what's happened in psychology as in the other social sciences.

Audrey Hamilton: Well, Dr. Haidt, thank you so much for joining us. I appreciate your time. It's been great.

Jonathan Haidt: My pleasure.

Audrey Hamilton: Thanks for listening. If you would like more information on the topics we discussed or if you would like to hear more episodes, please go to our [website](http://www.apa.org/research/action/speaking-of-psychology). ([/research/action/speaking-of-psychology](http://www.apa.org/research/action/speaking-of-psychology))_With the American Psychological Association's Speaking of Psychology, I'm Audrey Hamilton.

Date created: October 2016

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