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Empowering the people with 'deliberative democracy'

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Polarization is nothing new in our political system, but it's an issue that has gained more focus in the public's conscience because as it has grown worse and created greater dysfunction. Politicians make an easy scapegoat, and they are certainly part of the problem. However, it's fascinating and insightful to view the problem at the local level — as well as a solution taking roots there.

For example, a study done by The Pew Research Center found that over a quarter of people from each end of the political spectrum found the other party to be a threat to the nation's well-being. For many, Democrats and Republicans are not people with different solutions for our country's problems; they're like foreign enemies.

As reported by Vox, Yale professor Dan Kahan has a theory called

cultural cognition that tries to explain why this is the case. The theory suggests that we're polarized because of tribal mentality, meaning we rationalize information in order to avoid alienation within our social groups. In other words, our politics affect our reasoning, regardless of how informed we are.

For example, in Kahan's research, conservatives were found to be unconcerned about climate change despite being knowledgeable about the subject.

With the proliferation of outlets that allow us to pick information that best reaffirms our views, it's easy to remain comfortably within our ideological tribes and block out "dangerous" dissenting opinions. It's a vicious cycle.

What's the solution? How do we attack polarization and work past our cultural biases? What's more, how do we improve our political system?

Stanford professor James Fishkin believes the best response is "deliberative democracy, not audience democracy." He is the founder of Deliberative Polling.

Deliberative democracy is about engaging the public in the political process. It's the idea that the public needs to be given the time it otherwise doesn't have to thoughtfully form opinions that inform public policy.

"American politics is kind of a placeholder for what happens when you ask people 100 questions and give them no time, and tell them to organize their preferences when they don't know what they're talking about," said John Gastil, the director of the McCourtney Institute for Democracy. "These things impinge on our daily lives and ask us to

make profound judgments.”

Political scientists like Gastil and Fishkin argue that most people only have an impression of the issues due to how busy our daily lives are. They argue that deliberating policies and legislation that affect us can allow us to get past common misconceptions and cultural biases that otherwise go unchallenged.

“We need to thoughtfully empower the people,” said Fishkin.

It’s about establishing and expanding a deliberative climate. This has been done in various political processes. The Participatory Budgeting Project helps citizens decide what community projects should be funded with public money, while citizens in British Columbia have debated electoral reform for their province.

The most interesting and promising aspect of deliberative democracy is how its various methods engage the public: It’s about having a prolonged discussion while presenting every perspective around a particular issue. Not only do you gain a better understanding of policy options and their potential ramifications, you also gain a better understanding of the other side and where they’re coming from.

For example, a Deliberative Poll was conducted in a town in Northern Ireland over the potential integration of Catholic and Protestant schooling. After a day of deliberation with a vetted advisory board, the representative sample of the town’s population was asked their opinions regarding this issue. Their answers, in contrast to a conventional poll they took before deliberation, marked an interesting change.

The percentage of both Catholics and Protestants that believed the other side was “open to reason” increased by 16 percent. They were also more in favor for integrated schooling, which was used to support an integrated campus in the town.

“The random sample of the people is much more open to discussion and more willing to achieve some mutual understanding than the people who speak for them,” said Fishkin. “You begin to see the world from their point of view.”

Another example can be found in Oregon, where a panel called the Citizens’ Initiative Review Commission was created by the state legislature to review individual pieces of legislation. The panel of no more than two dozen randomly selected citizens is given a week to review legislation based on reviews by policy experts and other information. The group then prepares a position statement that will be

included in the Oregon Voters' Pamphlet.

On a 2010 mandatory sentencing bill, the panel, by a vote of 21-3, opposed the measure because members found it poorly written and potentially possessing unintended consequences. Although only 42 percent of the electorate "at least somewhat" knew of the poll at the time, 29 percent said they believed they were aided by the panel.

Despite this success, Gastil does acknowledge that cultural biases can kick in when it's time to vote.

"It was harder to eliminate false beliefs than it was to affirm accurate beliefs," he said. "If you say something enough times, people won't rule it out."

He hypothesizes that the tools of deliberative democracy need to tackle the falsehoods head on in order to eliminate them.

Gastil said our default reality is we're selective in what we choose to hear, and biased in how we draw on what we hear and say. But he argued this was a product of our socio-political climate, not human nature.

"The basic pathology of cultural cognition is a distortion in your empirical beliefs about the world," he said. "It's not that we're changing people; it's that we're changing the social and political circumstances in which we ask people to make judgments."

It's this change that makes deliberative democracy an important tool in improving our political system.

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