

Column: There is Hope for How We Talk About Politics

John Nagy/editor

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You are not imagining things: We are in another election season, the clearest evidence of which are all of the roadway signs that have popped up locally in the last couple of weeks.

Voting, by absentee ballot, is now underway for the March 3 North Carolina primary. Early voting begins Feb. 13 at both the Moore County Agricultural Center in Carthage and the Pinehurst Fire Department on Magnolia Road.

As if we have not spent the past four years locked in a war of words and polarized views, it is about to get uglier — much more so.

Need it? Not at all, and there's plenty of examples to back that up, chief of which was an ambitious project undertaken by The New York Times last fall.

For one weekend last September, 526 voters — statistically representative of all Americans registered to vote — were invited for an all-expenses-paid weekend at a Dallas resort. The purpose? "To show that there might be a better way to disagree," the paper said.

A nonpartisan group raised \$3 million to fund this group, and university researchers figured out the right people to invite. The almost universal first reaction: What kind of scam is this?

These individuals — all races, genders, creeds, beliefs and political ideologies — were not told to leave their politics at the resort entrance. Indeed, they were told to bring every grindable ax to the table.

"At least one woman," the paper said, "did not tell her parents she was coming here, because talking politics is so hard at home that she didn't want to admit she was flying to Texas to talk politics with people she didn't know."

Virtually all of you reading these words can understand that. These days, we all have friends who only want to talk politics or talk about anything BUT politics. The discourse has grown so divided, so passionate, so overheated, we have — or know of others — who have lost friendships, who can't talk to family, who have seriously questioned the sanity of spouses.

But the exercise in Texas was meant to test a theory being advanced by two Stanford University political scientists, James Fishkin and Larry Diamond. They believed that if you could put a diverse group of folks in a room for a time, “they’re likely to mute their harshest views and wrestle more deeply with rebuttals.”

Or, as Fishkin described it, the participants “don’t talk the way policy wonks talk about an issue. They bring their life experience, their observations. But they’re making arguments when they tell a story.”

With issues such as affordable health care, tariffs, immigration, federal minimum wage and climate change before them, the researchers — and participants — were surprised by the interactions.

“Voters on both the left and the right appeared to edge toward the center,” said the story, once researchers looked at surveys conducted at the start and at the end of the weekend. “Democratic support receded for a \$15 federal minimum wage and ‘Medicare for All’; Republican support grew for climate agreement and for protecting from deportation immigrants brought to the United States as children.

“During meals and at the bar at night, there were unlikely pairings of people everywhere, just talking, with no moderators.”

Said participant Susan Bosco, a 76-year-old woman from Fairfax, Virginia: “I think the purpose of this conference was to get people to accept each other’s points of view in a civil manner and to realize that basically, many people are inherently good and want what’s best for the country.”

In the end, you don’t have to be an academic to see what happened that September weekend in Dallas. The reality is that we all are closer together for what we share, than further apart for how we differ.

In the end, we all want quality health care we can afford; a good education for our children; clean water and air to consume; regulation that keeps us safe from the illest of intents; justice for those wronged; a nation whose differences these past 244 years have ultimately made us stronger.

So sure, the academics got to prove their research. And we got to prove something of ourselves.

John Nagy

John Nagy is editor of The Pilot. Contact him at thepiltoeditor@gmail.com or (910) 693-2507.