



Opinion

Finding that less partisan middle ground may just take sympathetic listening: Richard M. Perloff

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By Guest Columnist, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND -- *They* are hypocrites and selfish. *Their* minds are barricaded closed to *our* ideas. *We* don't want to hang out with them at all. [This](#) is what staunch Democrats say about Republicans and strong Republicans claim about Democrats, illustrating the persistent ways affective polarization is splitting Americans of different partisan stripes.

Even as [a recent national poll](#) shows that substantial majorities of Democrats and Republicans agree the pandemic is a major problem for the U.S. economy, twice as many Democrats (82%) view the virus outbreak as a major threat to public health as Republicans (41%). And, for better or worse, Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to favor closing elementary and high schools for face-to-face learning and

If the past is any guide, and it frequently is when it comes to partisan polarization, both sides will continue to talk past each other when it comes to reaching even rudimentary agreement on how best to cope with the economic and public health dimensions of the pandemic.

However, as two leading political scientists have forewarned, “When societies divide into partisan camps with profoundly different worldviews, and when those differences are viewed as existential and irreconcilable, political rivalry can devolve into partisan hatred.” Little by little, the irreconcilable partisan divide can sunder the time-honored norms of American democracy.

It doesn't have to be this way. Pollyannaish as it may sound, three lines of social science research show that treating adversaries in positive, respectful ways can overcome resistance, replacing it with, if not agreement, mutual understanding.

First, research has documented that when researchers affirm people's sense of self – for example, by inducing them to feel good about a strong personal value – they validate their worth as human beings. This global validation of their personal self-worth, unlike a verbal attack which provokes resistance, warms people's hearts, opens their psychological pores and actually increases their receptivity to considering alternative views.

Second, a strategy called motivational interviewing eschews hard-ball efforts to “get” someone to change an entrenched social attitude, recognizing this will only cause people to dig in their heels. Instead, change agents help people “find their own intrinsic motivation to change by interviewing them — asking open-ended

Thirdly, in deliberative polling, pioneered by political scientist [James Fishkin](#), a representative sample of citizens gather together for a weekend, talking among themselves about controversial political issues. Seeing each other as fellow human beings, rather than as polarized liberal or conservative caricatures, as occurs over social media, participants nod their heads, listen, change their opinions to reflect what they heard, and grow more tolerant.

You may say these are nice pie-and-the-sky ideas, but how can they work in a mass-media society? One way, pioneered by Fishkin and his colleagues, is to employ an [online platform](#), with a chat box serving as a discussion host, in this way encouraging thoughtful deliberation about issues.

It is also possible that social media companies could revise their algorithms so they include posts that challenge, as well as reinforce, users' attitudes. A recent [American Economic Review](#) article suggested that if algorithms encouraged exposure to dissonant messages, they could nudge people to become less politically polarized.

A more long-term approach emphasizes civics education, gravely important, given public ignorance, but [poorly financed](#). Civics coursework that teaches the value of open-mindedness, introduces [news media literacy](#), and gives students practice engaging in civil debate can teach a new generation the tolerant habits of the heart that will advance their political socialization, as well as the larger democratic project.

Richard M. Perloff, a Cleveland State professor of communication, psychology and political science, is the author of "[The Dynamics of Political Communication](#)."

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