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Opinion | We need politics, but with empathy: Enter “Shaping Our Future

By Thay Graciano on April 17, 2021
We all know that polarization is a perverse and pervasive fact of current politics. On Twitter, Facebook, in classes and at dinner with that uncle you barely see, conversations can quickly turn from general to discourteous. We can’t seem to see eye-to-eye on the obligations of government and it often feels as if people from different political leanings simply do not “get it.” This sense of frustration is underscored by the fact that opportunities for civil dialogue and debate over the important issues facing the country are few. Due to the selective nature of an elite institution, many students at Stanford come from similar backgrounds – further, we often select for the people we interact with on a daily basis, as we gravitate toward those with similar values. For that reason, occasions in which we engage in substantive conversation with those with starkly different beliefs can be rare. While we might scuffle on the minutiae of policy implementation with our friends, occasionally bump into someone holding a radically different position, most of us rarely sit down for a long conversation with them.

In 2019, I had the amazing opportunity to work as a research assistant for America in One Room (A1R). This was a deliberative democracy event spearheaded by professors James Fishkin and La
I came to see people not as political opponents, but as fellow human beings, whose beliefs have been shaped by their experiences, fears and hopes.

I came to realize that even if people come with opinions you don’t agree with, you have a chance to understand why they think in that way, share your reasons as to why you don’t agree, and importantly, not alienate yourself from conversations you care about or live under the illusion that certain people are not worth engaging with. After all, it is likely that ideas you currently hold as unshakeable emerged as instinct, which only became certainty through curiosity and conversations with others.

A similar opportunity is now arriving at Stanford, and I invite readers of the Stanford Daily to take part. *Shaping Our Future* will take place virtually on May 1-2. It is a unique virtual event that will bring together over a thousand young people from 25 states and various backgrounds, and participants will discuss salient policy issues such as wealth, taxes, electoral reform and climate policy.

As a participant, not only will you get to share your own views, but you will also learn from people who experience and see the world through a very different lens. Before the event, the organizing team will send you balanced briefing materials on the topics being discussed — so don’t worry if
participating in an important and unique national experiment, you will also be given the opportunity to pose questions to a panel of experts from all sides of the debate, making tricky proposals more tangible and solutions more evident.

I hear you. Life is busy and the world is literally falling apart. But think about this: You’re not the only one feeling that way, and you may just learn more in the process of sharing a weekend with people who are also having a hard time, and who are curious enough to give a damn. As we make our path at Stanford, political conversations can be shrouded in the sense of confusion and powerlessness. Yet politics is not a process by which we must immediately change the world in order for it to matter. The changes we make to ourselves, our opinions and levels of empathy are equally important. To take part in Shaping Our Future, please use this form to sign up by this Friday, April 23.

*To learn more, reach out to the Shaping Our Future team at shapingourfuture ‘at’ stanford.edu.*

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