

WELCOME TO THE 2020 CHAMPLAIN INSTITUTE

We just don't talk anymore.

And by “we” I mean liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican, and often not even factions in the same party—right and far right, centrist left and progressive.

What's worse is that we also don't *listen*—or read, or understand, or seek out opinions and ideas that differ from our own.

It seems that with every news cycle, each side distrusts the other more. We read our journals and papers, scroll through our algorithmically-curated social media feeds, and struggle to understand how anyone could see it any differently. How could they, the other side, get this so wrong? How are they, the other side, going to spin this one?

No issue in American life is immune to fervent partisan reaction: the COVID response, the media, trust in scientists, whether climate change is real, immigration, the scope of the Second Amendment—the list is endless.

Take, for instance, trust in the media. The Pew Research Center, which has been studying political polarization in America for years, found that since late March to early May, “the share of Republicans who view the COVID-19 outbreak as a major threat to the nation's health dropped nine points, from 52% to 43%, while views on this issue among Democrats increased slightly from 78% to 82%. Democrats are now nearly 40 percentage points more likely than Republicans to consider the coronavirus a major threat to the health of the population.”¹

¹[pewresearch.org/science/2020/06/03/partisan-differences-over-the-pandemic-response-are-growing](https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/06/03/partisan-differences-over-the-pandemic-response-are-growing)

That political divide is a deep and growing chasm. But we're not just becoming more and more partisan. We're becoming more and more uncivil towards one another and feel more threatened and angry. We're hunkering down and blocking our ears. Bret Stephens of the *New York Times* recently wrote: "There is a spirit of ferocious intellectual intolerance sweeping the country... Contrary opinions aren't just wrong but unworthy of discussion. The range of political views deemed morally unfit for publication seems to grow ever wider."

This intolerance is not only hurting the fabric of civil society, our democratic processes, and any possibility of civil discourse, but it also seems to be hurting us *personally*. Data from Beyond Conflict, an organization that promotes reconciliation in conflict areas, show that "Americans feel 'dehumanised' by the opposing party—a sentiment often associated with political violence—at roughly the same level as Israelis and Palestinians viewed each other during the Gaza War in 2014."²

That is shocking.

What can be done?

There are signs of hope, or rather studies in hope. All you need is 526 voters, a long weekend, and a conference center in Dallas. Stanford's Center for Deliberative Democracy in conjunction with Helena, an NGO that works on seemingly intractable societal problems, and the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago designed an historic political experiment called America in One Room. This past September, they gathered a representative sample of the entire American electorate "in all its political, cultural, and demographic diversity."³ Over the course of a long weekend, the participants discussed five central issues to the 2020 election: healthcare, the economy and taxes, the environment, foreign policy, and immigration.

The executive summary of the results states: "There were dramatic changes of opinion. The most polarizing proposals, whether from the left or the right, generally lost support, and a number of more centrist proposals moved to the foreground. Crucially, proposals that were farther on the right typically

² economist.com/open-future/2019/03/15/our-politics-fails-us-so-heres-what-to-do

³ cdd.stanford.edu/2019/america-in-one-room/

⁴ cdd.stanford.edu/2019/america-in-one-room-results/

lost support from Republicans and proposals that were farther on the left typically lost support from Democrats. It seems our divisions are not immune to deliberation.”⁴ What’s more going in, only 30% said they thought American Democracy worked well. At the end of three days, that figure doubled.

Research from More In Common, an advocacy organization devoted to countering extremism, bears these findings out. As part of its ongoing investigation into the root causes of political polarization, More in Common studied whether Republicans and Democrats could separate perception from reality. On issues including climate change, patriotism, sexual assault, police conduct and more, they asked thousands of Americans what they themselves believed and what they estimated people on the other side believed. Their conclusion? “Americans have a deeply distorted understanding of each other. Overall, Democrats and Republicans imagine almost twice as many of their political opponents hold views they consider ‘extreme’ as they actually do. Even on the most controversial issues in our national debates, Americans are far less divided than most of us think.”⁵

How do we fix this perception gap?

We need to start talking. We need to start listening. College of the Atlantic’s Champlain Institute wants to be part of the solution. Let’s talk about it together.

Lynn Boulger

PS. I cite direct sources for the America in One Room experiment, but do read the NYT article about it, which also has portraits of every participant. It is fascinating. [nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/02/upshot/these-526-voters-represent-america.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/02/upshot/these-526-voters-represent-america.html)

⁵ perceptiongap.us/