

Respect in a Red or Blue World: Is That Even Possible?

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Many nurses avoid the world of public policy — capitals and statehouses and the like. I have not. I realized years ago that decisions made in those environments profoundly affected me, my colleagues, and the patients I cared for. Forty years later that has not changed.

When I first entered an unfamiliar political world, I was told, *“Never lie. Always be respectful regardless of someone’s party affiliation. All constituents deserve to be represented. Pay attention to details. The laws we make affect everyone in some way.”* I took that message to heart as I worked alongside legislative aides, elected officials, lobbyists, bureaucrats, republicans, and democrats. Even in that politicized environment, there was a sense of comradery. Republicans (R) and Democrats (D) disagreed on certain issues and philosophies as to the role of government, but they did it respectfully and without outsized rancor.

Over the years something changed. The R and D divide widened and became harder to navigate. There are many theories as to why. Regardless of the reasons, the environment is now one where hyperpolarization and binary choices are the norm, not the exception. There are winners and losers, the “good” guys and the “bad” ones. The culture I experienced, where respect and being respectful mattered, seems to have taken a backseat to a victory at any cost mentality.

Polarization is separation and clustering of political attitudes. Since the 1990’s, American’s liking for their own party and dislike of opponents has both increased (Hetzel & Lauren, 2020). Excessive polarization leads people to disregard views different from their own. America has reached a high level of polarization largely due to the outsized influence

and reliance on political party identities as a shortcut for determining who is “right” and who is “wrong.” Who is “good” and who is “bad.” Although only 10% of Americans identify as extremely liberal or extremely conservative, they dominate media coverage (Hetzel & Lauren, 2020). Even though most Americans do not report being affiliated with a particular major political party, a preference for one party or another is commonplace. Few are immune from being affected in some way by party politics. Other factors contributing to increased polarization include biased polling predicated on using divisive discrepancies in crafting the polling questions — global warming as opposed to climate change. Social media also contributes to the burgeoning of polarization.

How does polarization affect our relationships with others? Some have likened it to a dysfunctional relationship that cannot be escaped (Ripley et al., 2024). What healthy choices exist? The first approach is to avoid amplification of what is happening. Recognize that the media with its hyperbolic reporting is not helpful. Recognize that in a world as complex as ours, binary choices are not the only answer.

There is a difference between “respect” and “respectful.” Respect is a description of someone held in high esteem while respectful is showing consideration and regard for others. (Note “others” is not limited to those who are just like us.) If there is any hope of returning to a more collegial approach to problem solving, people will have to respectfully engage in sustained intergroup contact where a genuine exchange of ideas can safely occur. Having multiple members representing both “sides” is important. On a

personal level, individuals can take time to assess their own responses to information attributed to one party or another. Are reactions including acceptance or repudiation based on facts or on who is delivering the message? Research has shown that when a message comes from someone with whom we identify, we are more likely to accept its veracity. While people may agree that something is a problem, support for possible solutions are impacted by who presents it — an R or a D (Walter & Redlawsk, 2019).

Working in a politicized setting makes it more difficult to take a moment to question what is being said and consider personal implicit biases. By tempering the rhetoric or responses to the message we could make it possible to work together and respectfully develop well-thought-out answers and solutions.

Is it possible for respect and respectfulness to exist in a politicized world given our current climate? It is — if we intentionally work to make that happen. ■

References online:
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