Getting Beyond Polarization

POLARIZATION CAN DEGRADE THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS. HERE'S HOW YOU CAN HELP THWART ITS NEGATIVE EFFECTS.

By Richard Chasin

BREAKING POLARIZING HABITS

How do you feel when you are attacked, stereotyped, silenced, ignored or excluded because of your party affiliation? What effect has polarization had on your willingness to work with members of the other party and your ability to get things done?

As the demand for party loyalty and discipline increases, legislators are often pressured to vote party over constituency or conscience. The devaluation of collaboration, compromise and cross-aisle comity can hortic any state house, especially when the chambers of a legislature are controlled by different parties, a chamber is closely split or the governor and the majority aren’t of the same party. When a legislature is locked in hostile paralysis, idealists get disheartened, pragmatists get frustrated, and the gregarious become unnaturally guarded.

We may speculate about possible causes of
polarization: gerrymandering, term limits, PACS, the politics of personal attacks, the disappearance of free time, the speed and range of the Internet, media coverage that highlights sensational events, the tranchant sound bytes of embattled partisans, and the ascent of well-funded, single-issue interest groups that mobilize grass-roots support at both partisan extremes. Whatever the factors, we must deal with their effects.

**LOOKING FOR ANSWERS**

If you are frustrated by polarization, there’s much you can do. You can develop working and personal relationships across the aisle and across divides of religion, background and geography.

“Speak with everyone you can,” says Ohio Representative Merle Grace Kearns. “No one has all the answers.” You can cosponsor bills, participate in bipartisan policy development groups, listen to diverse constituents, and hone your negotiation, mediation and consensus building skills in workshops like “Beyond Bickering and Gridlock: Your Role in Changing the Legislature.” Minnesota Representative Sheila Kiscaden developed this program in conjunction with the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota, the Policy Consensus Institute and NCSL. You might attend meetings where politics is off the table and personal relationships can develop on a nonpartisan basis.

You also can fight polarization simply by paying serious attention to the way you communicate your differences. After two women staff members were murdered in 1994 at Boston clinics where abortions were performed, six pro-choice and pro-life leaders decided it was time to talk. Their objective was to reduce tension and prevent future hostilities—from either side. They avoided using demonizing language in public settings and alerted each other privately about potential risks. The six expected to have only a few sessions, but ended up meeting secretly for five years in order to explore the full depth of their differences. In a 2001 Boston Globe Sunday feature, “Talking with the Enemy,” the six leaders reported this paradox: They had developed deep mutual understanding, respect and affection for each other, and at the same time had become more strongly convinced of their own original views on abortion.

**AVOID THESE BAD HABITS**

Polarization often comes less from our fervent differences than from how we talk about and treat those with whom we disagree. The following communication habits can polarize.

1. **Unprovable (or at least unproven) Accusations**
   “The governor has no credibility.” Such statements provoke cycles of attack and counter attack. What slurs have come your way? How have you reacted?

2. **Stereotypes**
   “Waffling moderate.” “Bigoted extremist.” A stereotype implies that you are not a distinctive individual, but simply one member of a troublesome group. Even if it is technically accurate, e.g., “product of Ivy League schools,” it bleaches out one’s unique qualities. What stereotype about you is particularly maddening? Is there any truth to it?

3. **Rhetorical Questions**
   “Why are you so misleading?” may mean “I find your comments misleading.” How do you react to these verbal wolves in sheep’s clothing? How have you handled pseudo questions?

4. **Attributions of Nefarious Motive**
   When she was told that her opponents on a cigarette tax bill had been “bought and sold by Philip Morris,” Representative Kiscaden responded, “You needn’t be so harsh.” How have extreme ill-intentions been ascribed to you (or your opponents)? Which was most baffling? Irritating? How have you responded?

5. **Not Listening**
   Can you recall times when people did not even try to take in what you were saying, but seemed simply to be preparing their critiques and counter-claims? Did you find a way to get fuller attention?

6. **Disqualifying, Dismissing, Silencing**
   “You are not an expert or a permanent resident of this state.” Such assertions imply that a person has no right to be heard. When was the last time you were wiped out of a discussion? What happened?

7. **Unallloyed Certainty**
   Some people talk as though they are sure of everything they say, never expressing the slightest doubt or mixed feelings. How do you respond to them? Do you believe they are arrogant, robotic, utterly convinced or something else?

8. **The Two Sides to an Issue**
   What sometimes passes for balanced reporting is the presentation of one view and one counterview, with most facts and all other perspectives omitted. How do you react when asked to position yourself either as “for” or “against” a position and are given no other options?

**HOW TO DEPOLARIZE**

- If you must accuse, be specific.
- Don’t ask rhetorical or entrapping questions.
- Listen openly.
- Let everyone speak.
- Don’t use unfounded attributions.
- Admit you don’t know everything.
- Avoid black and white descriptions.
- Call others on their polarizing communication.

**BECOME AN ANTIDOTE**

Sad to say, these habits are common in the world of politics and stir up misunderstanding, antipathy and distrust—the three essential ingredients of polarization. If you believe that polarization is poison for democratic practice, here are some ways to become an antidote. You already are likely to be adept at these alternative modes of communication in some areas of your life. The trick is for you to apply your skill in the polarizing force field of politics today.

1. **If you must accuse, be specific.** Don’t paint with a broad brush.
2. **In describing others, be precise.** Avoid stereotypes.
3. **Ask honest questions.** Avoid rhetorical or entrapping questions. Seek answers only to get information or clarification.
4. **Listen openly.** Avoid just scanning for errors or preparing your next statement while others are talking.
5. **Let everyone speak.** Avoid leaving people cut off or shutting them up.
6. **Never assume you know someone’s motives.** Avoid unfounded attributions.
7. **Admit some ambivalence.** Talk with conviction, but be honest about not knowing everything. Avoid arrogance.
8. **Reflect appreciation for the complexity of issues.** Avoid arbitrary pros and cons.
9. **Don’t let others use polarizing language.** Look for appropriate ways to call others on their polarizing communications. Don’t accept such practices.