Could civil discourse make us and our public policy decisions better?

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June 30, 2017 — The latest Vanderbilt Poll (conducted annually since 2011 by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Vanderbilt, to provide a non-partisan and scientifically based reading of public opinion in Tennessee and in Nashville) has a couple interesting findings. First, Tennessee Independents want *both* parties to moderate their positions. And a decent majority of all those polled responded *positively* when asked if they enjoy talking about politics with someone who has a different political view than theirs. Think about that: in Tennessee, many actually *enjoy* discussing politics among people who disagree!

These are welcome indicators of a nascent pushback against forces that have been polarizing public opinion and party politics. People have complained for years about partisan gridlock, blaming log-jammed legislation on Washington politicians and ugly spectacles on professional talking heads. But recently, sociologists and political psychologists have pointed out that ordinary citizens are not simple victims this gridlock: rather our own self-enclaving political habits may actually be *driving* these trends. That is to say, the more we talk, listen and interact only with friends and media sources that confirm our own political beliefs, the less tolerance and understanding we have for those with whom we differ, the more extreme our own opinions become, and the more inclined we are to support politicians who represent more extreme versions of our party's platform.

The more we self-enclave to protect ourselves from the ever-increasing harshness of political disagreement, the more we actually feed the culture of political polarization.

So the 2017 Vanderbilt Poll represents a promising germ of a trend. A significant majority of Tennesseans want to talk about political issues with people of different opinions. As importantly, Tennessee independents want to lead all of us toward some political moderation.

Democracy depends, as our framers understood, on the path that leads from disagreement (which is where we are currently stuck) to *deliberation*. Our ability to travel that path depends on our ability to disagree civilly (this is where people with a commitment to moderation and energy for moderating perform an important civic role). Disagreement is actually a *good* word for democracy, and it looks like Tennesseans may be remembering that wisdom in this deeply divided political moment.

Arguing to persuade is at the heart of our political process. And successful argument depends on a level of respect for difference of opinion. We live in a closely divided polity. Seldom is there unanimity, and when there is—take 9/11 for instance—it doesn't last long. I know one thing for sure: once somebody calls me a name, I'm pretty well done listening for the moment. The current politics of demonization—*racist! science-denier! hypocrite! elitist!*—only persuades differently minded people to circle the wagons against the insults. Today's reflexive habits of partisan oversimplification and name-calling intensify, rather than moderate, disagreement. They diminish and sometimes even eliminate grounds for democratic conversation and compromise.

If you are inspired by your Tennessee polling neighbors to start experimenting with talking out political differences, moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt can help you understand why it's important to start with at home. His important book, *The Righteous Mind*, helps us examine our own role in disagreement. As he observes, we are all habitually sure that our own approach to politics is entirely rational. We read the news. We consult editorials. We argue based on careful fact. The difficulty is that our opponents are *just so irrational*. In response, we right thinkers work hard to show them the error of their thought. We demonstrate for them what rational thought looks like, and we offer all the relevant facts. When our opponent fails to change his or her mind, it's easy to conclude that she or he just can't be made to care about rationality or facts.

The problem though, as Haidt details, is that *none* of us actually arrive at our political and moral beliefs rationally. Political commitments come to all of us in an intuitive rush, and once the feelings surface, our cognitive brain starts looking for ways to rationalize them. This deserves emphasizing: our political judgments are not coolly considered and rationally cognitive: they're intuitive and based in hot emotion. In response to our powerful political feelings, we all search out facts that make our feelings look as right as they feel, and then we seek affirmation from others whose feelings are similarly persuaded by our facts.

That doesn't necessarily make our choices wrong, or bad, or unfounded. It should, though, encourage us to be mindful while talking about politics, to pay attention to how our brain and heart are working. Haidt is not arguing that the heart wrongfully triumphs over reason—he's arguing that we can't reason without our heart, and that feeling is its own kind of cognition. But his point is insistent: whenever we think that our political choices are founded in cool reason, we need to stand back and pay attention to the post-hoc ways we justify our powerfully primary political feelings.

I can give you a quick example. Think about driving home in your car while listening to the news on your radio. A political figure you despise is introduced into the story, and he or she starts talking.

You can't mute the volume fast enough. Flooded with indignation, you're shaking your head, you're talking at the muted radio, you won't turn the show back on till you're sure that segment is done, because you DO NOT NEED TO HEAR IT. That person is horrible: dead wrong, maybe amoral. Definitely not worth listening to.

In that moment: meet the force of your political feelings. In this moment, you won't consider—literally can't take on board—the arguments of someone with whom you disagree. You dislike that person *because* he or she infuriatingly insists on spouting stupid, even criminal, opinions, using fake news and alternative facts to support those awful "opinions."

This is your brain on politics. It's not coolly rational: nope, not at all. Our brain on politics is loaded for confirmation bias. We are flooded by feeling, and in response, we ignore facts that contradict our feelings while looking for facts and interpreting them in ways that make us feel right. What does this boil down to? As political thinkers, we all cheat like crazy, as many studies show. We lie, to ourselves by ignoring facts we don't like, and to others when we justify our own political feeling with partial facts all the while insisting our conclusions represent the total and only truth. This makes us great at challenging our opponents' rational biases, and, hypocritically, *all but blind* to our own.

Haidt shows how political morality works to *bind* us into political tribes, but also to *blind us*. It binds us into teams where the bath of belonging feels affirming, precisely as it blinds us to the views and values of others—and even to objective reality. We humans are in fact competitive and selfish hypocrites who love our team and want to defeat the other team at any cost. But we are not only or always selfish—we can under the right circumstances be very altruistic. And that ability to transcend is what we seek to cultivate with civil deliberation.

Our team spirit can be good for democracy, in other words, but only up to the point that it gets so fierce that it cultivates self-righteous intolerance, leading us to reject civil deliberation with differently minded people (even seeking to deny their First Amendment rights). We need difference of opinion to thrive as a society—which means that we need the ideas of people on other teams, whether they're "wrong" or not.

James Suroweicki's *Wisdom of the Crowd* helps us see how. Combatting our durable assumption that crowds are mobs of fools and always to be shunned, he examines the

different kinds of problems our collective intelligence can solve and under what conditions. He urges us to embrace the wisdom of the crowd—the wisdom of all of us, not just some of us. Studying conditions that support collective intelligence, he shows that groups make stronger, wiser decisions when they support and reward disagreement and contest rather than seeking consensus or compromise. He demonstrates that that the presence of dissenting opinion—*even when factually wrong*—results in the group making better decisions.

Surowiecki's crucial point is that when people think too much alike, they find it harder to keep learning. Members' certitude that they are most qualified to judge the facts leads to blinding self-righteousness, making them less likely investigate alternatives. The less diversity of thought, the poorer the decision of the group.

Partisan echo chambers—among experts, in internet and social media circles, in our neighborhoods and churches, and maybe even at our workplaces—arm us with facts, making us feel exceedingly rational. They encourage us to ignore those who offer *different* facts and opinions. If diversity is what makes group decisions better, though, we should notice and care that difference of opinion is what partisan thinking works often works to expel.

Our partisan echo chambers purposefully reinforce our belief that our team has the *only* answers for making a stronger democracy. But increasingly, science and social science—and now Tennessee citizens—are upholding the framers' view. Partisan thinking on its own cannot make our democracy stronger and better. Rather, cultivating a carefully civil, thoughtful and open relationship with difference of opinion will. Our differences of political opinion—all the disagreement and argument that flow from them—are a positive good for democracy. Understanding that can increase our capacity for deliberating our political differences, at the very least encouraging us learn what kinds of facts might actually sway people with whom we disagree, and better, helping us see a bigger picture when it comes to the issues we care about.

Dr. Dana Nelson is one of the country's leading American Studies scholars and a prominent advocate for active citizenship and democracy. Her works include *Commons Democracy: Reading the politics of Participation in the Early United States* (2016) and *Bad for Democracy: How the President Undermines the Power of the People* (2008).