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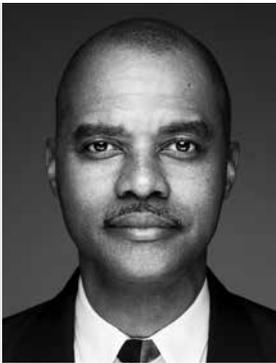
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Polarization, Incivility, and a Need for “Change”



We live in a time where the demands for change and the promises of change dominate much of American discourse. While many Americans are clamoring for change and many politicians are promising change, it's not always clear what this so-called change is supposed to look like. What

exactly is it that people are wanting and what exactly is it that politicians are promising?

While there is no universal consensus regarding a definition of “change,” there do seem to be some common assumptions shared by many people when talking about change. The most prevalent assumption is that change involves the replacement of a present undesired way of being with a proposed desired alternative way of being. Often implicit in this assumption is a belief held by those demanding change that their views represent the desired alternative way of being, while the present undesired way of being is represented by the views of those needing to change. In other words, usually when people are demanding change, what they are really demanding is that “others” see things the way they already see them.

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How Rhetoric of Change Contributes to Polarization

Far too often when we refer to “change,” we’re referring to something we believe “others” need to do rather than something we ourselves also need to do. During a period that many people have identified as the most deeply divided period in American politics and culture—a period where political gridlock is the norm rather than the exception—there has been an exponential increase in the rhetoric of “change” (Noah 2008). I find that extremely ironic. Everyone is dug in, entrenched, and unwilling to move from their ideological position; at the same time everyone is talking about, demanding, and even promising change. What kind of change is possible when no one thinks they need to change and everyone thinks “others” need to change?

The belief that others are “the problem” hinders change and contributes to much of the incivility and polarization

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within society today. Polarization within both the United States Senate and the House of Representatives is the highest it has been since the Civil War post-Reconstruction period (“Polarization”).

A study of 10,000 Americans (“Political Polarization”) finds that polarization among Americans is more extreme than it has been any time in the last 20 years (Wade). The nature of this divide reflects a depth of cultural conflict that results in the demonization of people who hold opposing views (Bridges). People on opposite sides are not now simply “wrong”; they are immoral and must be opposed. Over a quarter of democrats and a third of republicans see “the other” as a “threat to the nation’s well-being” (Wade). In order to experience meaningful transformative change, this demonization of others—which only contributes to incivility and polarization—has to stop.

The Limitations of our Perspectives

Only when we allow ourselves to truly hear the perspectives of others can genuine dialogue take place. Engaging in concurrent monologues devoted to persuading others is not the same thing as engaging in dialogue. Monologues are simply about expressing one perspective. Dialogue, however, is about sharing insights and learning from one another in order to arrive at positions reflective of multiple perspectives.

“Our worldviews and ideologies make it difficult for us to acknowledge the provisional nature of our perspectives. Instead, we operate from positions of certainty, which hinder civility between people possessing differing views.”

Every belief we possess is based on limited amounts of information and personal experiences. When confronted with the reality of a multiverse that is infinite, we have to acknowledge that there is far more we do not know than we do know. If there is an infinite amount to learn and experience, and if our perspectives are based upon limited amounts of information and experiences, then

our perspectives can only be provisional and contingent at best. We have to be willing, therefore, to consider the possibility that our perspectives do not represent the right, the best, or the only perspectives.

This way of thinking is rarely easy because one’s perspective is often a reflection of one’s worldview, which is difficult to alter because there is much at stake if the worldview is “wrong.” Worldviews are so deeply embedded in our consciousness and in the habits of our lives that to question our worldview is in many ways to question reality itself. Our worldviews are shaped by our ideologies, which represent complex belief systems that attempt to make sense of and explain social and political arrangements and relationships.

Our worldviews and ideologies make it difficult for us to acknowledge the provisional nature of our perspectives. Instead, we operate from positions of certainty, which hinder civility between people possessing differing views.

Using Social Media to Promote Civility

Social media often reinforces our notions of certainty. Since most people gravitate toward media sources that affirm preexisting views, social media frequently affirms our belief that “others” are the ones who need to change. Social media regularly functions as an “echo chamber” that filters the information we receive, thereby affirming our opinions about “others” (“Reason Your Feed”). Echo chambers present single ideological perspectives that resonate with the perspectives people already have, creating dangerous ideological bubbles (Grimes).

Given this challenge, I am attempting to develop a social media platform called “Clamoring for Change”¹ that seeks to burst such ideological bubbles. Clamoring for Change endeavors to create a space that welcomes multiple ideological perspectives and encourages interaction and conversation across multiple perspectives.

While America is becoming increasingly divided along ideological fault lines, the majority of Americans are not ideological extremists (“Political Polarization”). This American majority, however, is often less politically engaged and frequently less willing to participate in discourse about important social issues—possibly because of frustration, disillusionment, and a distaste for the

rancor and incivility associated with such discourse. Their lack of engagement allows extremist on both the right and the left to dominate much of the discourse, which results in increased polarization and incivility.

Changing the Way We Think about Change

While much of the rhetoric of change in America today is targeted at changing “others,” meaningful transformative change is not primarily about persuading and convincing one side to see things the way the other side sees them. Instead, change is about each and every side embracing perspectives informed by engagement with and understanding of others.

Understanding is a necessary ingredient for meaningful transformative change. We must all seek to understand as much as we seek to be understood. Unfortunately, too often we focus more on being understood than on trying to understand.

What is more, in our quest to be understood, we must at all times ask ourselves whether what we’re saying and the way we are saying it encourages others to seek to understand us. If we genuinely seek to be understood, we must give others a reason to want to understand us. Being disrespectful to others does not give others a reason to want to understand us.

This is not an issue of “political correctness.” It is an issue of respect—which goes a long way in reducing incivility and polarization. Promoting civility is not about promoting agreement. We are not suggesting people will (or even should) agree on everything. Differing perspectives are an essential component of a thriving and vibrant society. Disagreement is not the cause of incivility and polarization. Disrespect is a primary source of incivility and polarization, and disrespect is almost always rooted in a lack of understanding.

Request for Participation

In order for a project like Clamoring for Change to succeed, we need numerous contributors representing multiple ideological perspectives to produce “user

content” (e.g. blogs, videos, podcasts, etc.) and we need participants with diverse perspectives to join the conversations regarding important social issues. While the creation of this platform is an ambitious project, we believe it has the potential of making a major contribution to the promotion of civil dialogue in a society that is growing increasingly polarized.

Please visit the Clamoring for Change website (listed below) and consider joining us in our effort to reduce polarization by promoting understanding of and engagement with multiple ideological perspectives.

Endnotes

1. Clamoring for Change is “a space that seeks to bring together people who are interested in effecting meaningful societal change regarding important social issues. We hope to help reduce societal polarization and promote civil dialogue by building a community of people with diverse views, opinions, and ideas, who are willing to share, listen, and learn—people who not only want to bring about change but who are also open to experiencing change themselves.” See clamoringforchange.com/about/.

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