



Polarization: What Can We Do?

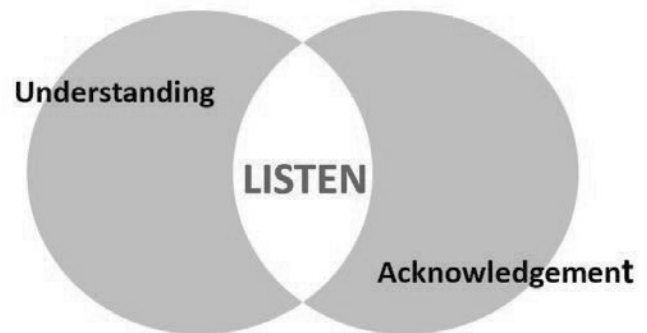
A Response to Robert Talisse

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Robert Talisse begins his article with the assertion that America is a “backsliding democracy.”¹ One indicator is highly visible political polarization working in tandem with the less visible, but no less important, belief polarization. This troubling combination leads to unchecked extremism among our political class, political intransigence and tribalism, and an increased animus of one against another. A deeper concern is that “our capacities for responsible citizenship – specifically, our aptitude for navigating political disagreement” has atrophied.

But what can we practically do? Talisse proposes three steps to “manage conflict:”

- 1. Encourage and promote civility and common ground among like-minded groups.** As political and belief polarization grow, “each camp grows more invested in policing the borders between them.” Internal members become obsessed with virtue-signaling, both by demonstrating “hostility towards the out-group” and developing exacting “standards for authentic in-group membership.” Opposition shrinks and dissipates or is run out of the party. The most important proving ground for conflict management, therefore, is within our own ideological coalitions. By making our own turf less extreme, Talisse reasons, we can de-escalate conformity, increase tolerance among our allies, and ultimately sow seeds for reducing cross-party conflict.
- 2. To maintain healthy alliances, engage the critics.** We don’t need to make peace with those who have opposing world views, Talisse argues, but we would be better off understanding why they believe they’re right and we’re wrong. Opposing sides need not come together to resolve disputes, but they should be encouraged to continue to publicly and transparently air those disputes together (hopefully in a civil way).



- 3. Increase participation in cooperative endeavors for which partisan identity is irrelevant.**² We need to get outside our comfort zones and information cocoons and interact with people in non-ideological ways. Think curling clubs, charitable service, performing arts – i.e., life beyond politics.

Although Talisse makes a case for nuance, most of it sounds like common sense: Keep your friends close, your enemies closer . . . and get a life. While I agree with Talisse’s rationale, I offer a couple of complementary ideas.

First, real-world experience suggests that honest, civil dialogue *across* party lines is both possible and impactful. Interestingly, many citizens at the community level and college campuses are figuring this out without a playbook and engaging in a multitude of grassroots civil dialogue experiments.³ Even in the super-duper polarized Capitol building, Ds and Rs are working together on a variety of less public bills. Sadly, we hear little of this, partly because of our sensationalized and salacious media, but also because the parties themselves don’t find it politically expedient to spotlight collaboration. Even as we are working within our coalitions, we can also work across the divide.

Next, it is one thing to expound on the importance of being civil, tolerant, and a good manager of conflict, whether among members of our in-group or among outsiders. It is another thing entirely to do it effectively. Tania Israel, in her recent

► p.26

1. <https://www.idea.int/gsod/global-report#chapter-2-democracy-health-check-an-overview-of-global-tre>.

2. See <https://thefulcrum.us/civic-ed/moral-citizenship>.

3. See <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2022/02/college-campus-free-speech-cancel-culture/621484/>; also <https://www.ncdd.org/>.

book *Beyond Your Bubble*, summed up the key to successful engagement with people who don't agree with us:

*You need to truly want to understand the other person, and you need a degree of humility to believe it's as important for you to understand them as it is for them to understand you. You may have to push yourself to care about what the other person is saying and convince yourself that they have something valuable to offer.*⁴

In other words, for successful dialogue across political boundaries, we must try to understand people who think differently than we think and to acknowledge what others are saying to help them feel understood and seen.⁵ The glue that

binds these principles together is the simple, but profound act of listening.

We cannot afford to give in to the cynical impulse that makes it all too easy to categorize and pigeon-hole each other – our allies and our adversaries – or ourselves. Like Robert Talisse, I believe we need to actively seek understanding among our allies as a rational step to curb polarization. But we can also seek to productively engage those who think differently than we do. But only if we are willing to see them for who they are.

Editor's Note: Read all of Eric's "Conflict Management" columns on the League's website:
<https://lwm-info.org/1592/Conflict-Management>

4. Tania Israel. *Beyond Your Bubble: How to Connect Across the Political Divide, Skills and Strategies for Conversations That Work* (New York: APA Life Tools, 2020), 26.

5. Israel, 30.

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