

Why Partyism Is Wrong

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A college student came to me recently with a quandary. He'd spent the summer interning at a conservative think tank. Now he was applying to schools and companies where most people were liberal. Should he remove the internship from his résumé?

I advised him not to. Even if people disagreed with his politics, I argued, they'd still appreciate his public spiritedness. But now I'm thinking that advice was wrong. There's a lot more political discrimination than I thought. In fact, the best recent research suggests that there's more political discrimination than there is racial discrimination.

For example, political scientists Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood gave 1,000 people student résumés and asked them which students should get scholarships. The résumés had some racial cues (membership in African-American Students Association) and some political cues (member of Young Republicans).

Race influenced decisions. Blacks favored black students 73 percent to 27 percent, and whites favored black students slightly. But political cues were more powerful. Both Democrats and Republicans favored students who agreed with them 80 percent of the time. They favored students from their party even when other students had better credentials.

Iyengar and Westwood conducted other experiments to measure what Cass Sunstein of Harvard Law School calls "partyism." They gave subjects implicit association tests, which measure whether people associate different qualities with positive or negative emotions. They had people play the trust game, which

measures how much people are willing to trust different kinds of people.

In those situations, they found pervasive prejudice. And political biases were stronger than their racial biases.

In a Bloomberg View column last month, Sunstein pointed to polling data that captured the same phenomenon. In 1960, roughly 5 percent of Republicans and Democrats said they'd be "displeased" if their child married someone from the other party. By 2010, 49 percent of Republicans and 33 percent of Democrats said they would mind.

Politics is obviously a passionate activity, in which moral values clash. Debates over Obamacare, charter schools or whether the United States should intervene in Syria stir serious disagreement. But these studies are measuring something different. People's essential worth is being measured by a political label: whether they should be hired, married, trusted or discriminated against.

The broad social phenomenon is that as personal life is being de-moralized, political life is being hyper-moralized. People are less judgmental about different lifestyles, but they are more judgmental about policy labels.

The features of the hyper-moralized mind-set are all around. More people are building their communal and social identities around political labels. Your political label becomes the prerequisite for membership in your social set.

Politics becomes a marker for basic decency. Those who are not members of the right party are deemed to lack basic compassion, or basic loyalty to country.

Finally, political issues are no longer just about themselves; they are symbols of worth and dignity. When many rural people defend gun rights, they're defending the dignity and respect of rural values against urban snobbery.

There are several reasons politics has become hyper-moralized in this way. First, straight moral discussion has atrophied. There used to be public theologians and philosophers who discussed moral issues directly. That kind of public intellectual is no longer prominent, so moral discussion is now done under the guise of policy disagreement, often by political talk-show hosts.

Second, highly educated people are more likely to define themselves by what they believe than by their family religion, ethnic identity or region.

Third, political campaigns and media provocateurs build loyalty by spreading the message that electoral disputes are not about whether the top tax rate will be 36 percent or 39 percent, but are about the existential fabric of life itself.

The problem is that hyper-moralization destroys politics. Most of the time, politics is a battle between competing interests or an attempt to balance partial truths. But in this fervent state, it turns into a Manichaeian struggle of light and darkness. To compromise is to betray your very identity. When schools, community groups and workplaces get defined by political membership, when speakers get disinvited from campus because they are beyond the pale, then every community gets dumber because they can't reap the benefits of diverging viewpoints and competing thought.

This mentality also ruins human interaction. There is a tremendous variety of human beings within each political party. To judge human beings on political labels is to deny and ignore what is most important about them. It is to profoundly devalue them. That is the core sin of prejudice, whether it is racism or partyism.

The personal is not political. If you're judging a potential daughter-in-law on political grounds, your values are out of whack.

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