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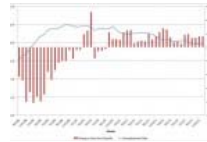
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The 'words hurt' model of polarization

Posted by Danny Hayes on January 6, 2013 at 1:51 pm

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*Poli-Sci Perspective is a weekly Wonkblog feature in which Georgetown University's Dan Hopkins and George Washington University's Danny **Hayes** and John Sides offer an empirical perspective on the issues dominating Washington. In this edition, Hayes looks at research showing how harsh language can lead to more polarization. For past posts in the series, head here.*

When House Speaker John Boehner told Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to "go f— yourself" in the midst of the fiscal cliff negotiations last week, it was but the most recent instance of the breakdown of congressional comity.

House Speaker John Boehner's speech polarizes. (J. Scott Applewhite, File/Associated Press)

In October 2009, Democratic Rep. Alan Grayson called former Vice President Dick Cheney a vampire, replete with "blood that drips from his teeth." Cheney, for his part, had actually given Boehner his fiscal cliff talking points back in 2004, when on the Senate floor he recommended that Democrat Patrick Leahy "go f— yourself."

Big whoop, right? Doesn't this just tell us that grown men can act like children, something we're already reminded of every time we see a Judd Apatow movie?

But spats like the Boehner-Reid dust-up might do far more. Some recent research suggests

that when politicians engage in PDA – public displays of anathema – Americans' attitudes toward the party they don't identify with grow increasingly negative, contributing to mass polarization.

Political scientists for years have debated whether the American public is polarized along ideological lines. On one hand, some research portrays the vast majority of Americans as centrist on most issues. Other work has argued that Republican and Democratic voters' policy views are far more divided.

But Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood and Yphtach Lelkes suggest in a new article that "affective polarization" may better describe the divide between party identifiers. Instead of focusing on ideology and policy positions, Iyengar and his colleagues draw on a psychological concept called social identity theory.

They argue that simply identifying with a political party, as most Americans do, is enough to generate unfavorable attitudes toward the other side, or the "out-party." (This idea should feel pretty familiar to Red Sox and Yankees fans.) And a variety of survey evidence shows that in recent decades Democratic identifiers have come to view Republicans increasingly negatively, and vice versa.

First, Iyengar and his colleagues examined partisans' ratings of the other party on a "feeling thermometer" – a measure that allows a survey respondent to say how "warm" or "cool" they feel toward another person or group.

In surveys in the 1980s, about 40 percent of Americans gave the out-party a rating lower than a neutral score of 50. But that figure climbed to 53 percent by the 1990s, 56 percent in 2004, and 63 percent in 2008. In 2008, the average rating of the out-party on a 0 to 100 scale was around a decidedly chilly 30. By way of comparison, the average score that Catholics and Protestants gave each other was about 66.

Second, the authors show that since 1960, the percentage of partisans who report they would be upset, displeased, or unhappy if they had a child who married a member of the out-party has climbed. In 1960, that number was 5 percent for Republicans, but had risen to 49 percent by 2010. For Democrats, the number increased from 4 percent to 33 percent. Really, who would want their kid to marry a vampire or a dictator?

Finally, Iyengar and his colleagues found that partisans are increasingly likely to describe members of the out-party in unflattering terms. In 1960, 21 percent of partisans said the other party's supporters were "selfish," but by 2008, that figure had risen to 47 percent. They also grew less likely to describe the other side as "intelligent," with that number declining from 27 percent to 14 percent from 1960 to 2008.

To be sure, some of this "affective" polarization stems from the growing ideological differences between the parties. In particular, the authors found that policy preferences on social welfare issues were significantly correlated with how favorably Americans' rated the out-party in comparison to their own party. This is consistent with Pew Research Center data showing that the largest "values" gap between Republicans and Democrats emerges on issues related to the social safety net.

But Iyengar and his colleagues suggest that issue positions are only part of the story. They argue that exposure to campaign discourse also breeds contempt for the out-party.

They find that in 2004 and 2008 battleground state residents and people in states with more negative advertising were likely to have more polarized attitudes than other Americans. Ultimately, the authors' data don't allow them to test this proposition in a thorough way, but their findings are consistent with work showing that cues in the news media can activate social identities in the context of war.

That's why Boehner's choice words to Reid are more than just palace intrigue, to use the phrase of the week. When that kind of denigration is widely reported to the public, it may

reinforce the social identity that characterizes partisan attachments. And that may ultimately contribute to the corrosive views of the out-party that Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes colleagues document.

Call it the "go f— yourself" model of polarization.
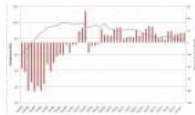
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Eddie Francis wrote:
2:50 AM EST

Go finagle yourself?

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shooting7sevens wrote:
1/6/2013 11:04 PM EST

Reid has done as much as anyone to bring Washington to where it is today and yet Democrats cheer his behavior. Likewise, Republicans are proud of Boehner for swearing at Reid. Is swearing more horrible than calling people liars, dictators or impugning their integrity (on the Senate floor, no less)? Neither side has clean hands and the problem is not really harsh language but the scorched earth policies employed to win elections. Both parties seek to completely savage their opponents because their cause is just. Unfortunately that mentality makes it harder to work together to achieve common goals. Politics has become constant warfare and no one is allowed to be a noncombatant.

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DavidinCambridge responds:
1:06 AM EST

"Is swearing more horrible than calling people liars, dictators or impugning their integrity?"

Yes, of course it is. Imagine your child calling you a dictator for grounding her. Now imagine her telling you to f*** yourself.

Case closed.

Eddie Francis responds:
2:49 AM EST

@DavidinCambridge

Only these men aren't little girls in your living room being told they are grounded, so I find your analogy disingenuous.

Or to put it another way, you have the logic of a little girl.

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Centsorsense wrote:
1/6/2013 7:59 PM EST

Did I really just read an article about our, "feeling thermometer"?
This is self indulgent tripe.
America is just to be contemptuous, when people behave in contemptible ways.
Anyone who isn't disgusted with Congress most likely hasn't been paying attention.

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Bill_USA wrote:
1/6/2013 5:06 PM EST

At least Boehner wasn't pretending to be more human than he really is (eg. his histrionic lugubriousness). He was just being the Repugnant that he is. ..Oh, and he was drawing inspiration from the Great Malevolence, Dick Cheney, who said the same to Sen. Patrick Leahy (a member of the Senate actually elected in a legitimate election) in 2004.

The GOP are making D.C. the Toxic Waste Super Cite of the country. the Repugnants seem to fall into two camps. One, abject con-men who will do anything for the right price (and obviously, corporations and the super wealthy are calling the shots by that measure), or the utter idiot ideologues, who really couldn't qualify to run a hot dog stand but think they know something about public policy and how to run a government. They think being zealots qualifies them as 'sincere' when they are really just fooling themselves and believeing that they think being 'sincere' (as they believe they are) over-rules everything else including knowledge, competence and full consciousness.

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drocto responds:
1/6/2013 11:43 PM EST

I'm left to hope that your entire post is satire given the content of the article. Yet I fear there is no irony.

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RobertDLewis wrote:
1/6/2013 5:04 PM EST

Seriously - the idea that polarization is more tribal than ideological is a new insight? That's pathetic. It's been obvious for years -- at least since Newt Gingrich published his notorious GOPAC memo.

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reussere wrote:
1/6/2013 3:47 PM EST

Another aspect of the idea of social polarization relates to how individual members of each party relate to individual members of the opposite party. I am a far-left Democrat, and one of my best friends is a far-right

Republican. Yet we get along very well simply because our relationship has many other aspects in common than our political differences. In fact, I think this can be said of most other types of rather shallow generalizations. Many decades ago I was in the Navy (Vietnam). I had a friend who was one of the most overtly racist individuals I have ever met. Yet he easily became a true genuine friend to a black man who he worked with. It didn't take long before their relationship had more mutual respect that most (and no they were not gay).

The thing is, deep partisan hatred or any other type of generalization, can only thrive in an atmosphere of ignorance.

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joesmith323 wrote:
1/6/2013 3:46 PM EST

Ignore for the moment questions of broad polarization of the public. Telling another politician to "go f*** yourself" is childish and self indulgent and demonstrates a profound lack of self control. To then go and brag about it to your friends, as Boehner is reported to have done, is astounding. No responsible, clear minded adult would do such a thing. It was probably a result of the stress that Boehner is under from the cognitive dissonance that flows inevitably from advocating the Republican platform - or maybe he was just drunk.

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Centsorsense responds:
1/6/2013 8:00 PM EST

The public isn't polarized. Democrats and Republicans work together in real life every single day. Politics is only a problem if you are politician.

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Ulium wrote:
1/6/2013 2:53 PM EST

So ... people are more polarized, and that polarization correlates with "policy preferences on social welfare issues" -- but this is evidence that bad language, affect, and social identity are driving things? Perhaps there is evidence for that connection in the paper itself, but as far as the facts presented in this blog post go, there appears to be no evidence that affect is driving things at all, and plenty of evidence that the parties are simply farther apart in policy (or at least, people are more acutely aware of their policy differences) than has been the case for decades.

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jkaren wrote:
1/6/2013 2:24 PM EST

this is one of the most essential articles to be read.
the discourse in washington, in the media....the incredible incivility and hatred being spewed out, is doing more to destroy the discussion than the ideas.
paul krugman refers to the president as a wimp, a member of congress screams out at him, "you lie."
would paul krugman call his son a wimp?
would that congressman yell at his child, "you lie!"
does boehner tell his neighbor to "go f***k yourself?"
as far as i am concerned, no matter what the ideology is, or their principles are, they are all wallowing around in a sewer.
this makes a difference.
when violence and nastiness and the constant blistering hate, callous snarkiness and derision that has become completely acceptable in the media and in washington, is how people in a culture, and leaders in particular, express themselves, it blunts and desensitizes everything.
until this stops....until there is some emphasis on the importance of character, of human kindness, then we have the culture that we deserve.
if paul krugman has something to say, he can say it without calling the president of the united states, a wimp. if john boehner has something to say to reid, he can find a better way to say it.
we live in a society that has no boundaries. every rudeness is acceptable...human kindness is just a sidebar.
respect and discretion dont matter at all in the public arena.
the only person in public life who maintains calm, and goodness and rises above the ugliness, callousness and rudeness, is president obama.
regardless of what you think of his policies, as a human being goes, he is one of the few figures in our culture who "stays human."

thank you for writing this post.
because until we can get some kindness and humility and boundaries back in our culture, we are going to honor
cruelty, violence and ugliness as a culture.
it isnt good.

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gagkk wrote:

1/6/2013 2:17 PM EST

Go f..... yourself -- Go filibuster yourself?

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