



AMERICA DIVIDED

BINDING NATIONAL DIVISION THROUGH CONVERSATIONS OF UNITY

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Bickering and back-talk. Coalitions formed in the spirit of condescendence. Just log onto Twitter or Facebook and you will tune in to people airing every unfiltered political opinion, thought and criticism in one another's faces. It seems the more polarized the nation becomes, the more we lose the ability to talk to one another. Is America as divided as it seems?

Any tension or division Americans may feel in their personal lives and relationships — on the Internet or in person — is reflected first and foremost in public political leadership.

Every four years, after the presidential election, Harvard University invites high-profile staff from the presidential campaigns to Cambridge, Massachusetts, for a post-election conference. The goal is to hash out the campaign process, discuss what worked, what did not and what can be improved going forward.

This year, in a live podcast

recorded out of Cambridge the day of the conference, White House correspondent Tamara Keith with National Public Radio compared the meeting to an episode of “Jerry Springer.”

Just as the front lines of a war, Democrats lined up bitterly on one side of the Harvard conference room while members of the GOP lined up belligerently on the other side. Both groups shouted past each other.

NPR reporter Sam Sanders compared it to “the first time the parents meet after a divorce.” NPR politics editor Domenico Montanaro said, “This is not what it’s supposed to be about.” His point was that this conversation is designed to be centered around mechanics.

Chances are the political vitriol that seeped into the walls of the conference room in Cambridge can be found at family dinner tables and in college dorm rooms around the country — brothers mock sisters and children turn their parents into caricatures of ideas. For many in the wake of post-election America, the United States ➤

feels more divided than ever.

Daniel Dominguez, senior music composition major at CBU, left El Salvador in 2013 to attend college in the United States. To Dominguez, an outside observer of the U.S. political climate, America feels very divided.

“It feels like more and more people are going to their own personal benefits,” he says. “Only polar opposites are being represented.”

Dominguez also points to a lack of communal identity.

“America is based on diversity and now it feels like it is going back,” he says. “There’s value in diversity. It’s not ‘me’ who makes America, it is ‘us’ who make America.”

Julie Goodman, CBU assistant professor of anthropology, also attributes division to loss of common identity.

“What pluralism has done is that it has divided us, not just into two camps, but it has divided us religiously, culturally and ethnically,” she says. “How many ways can we divide? When we look at other cultures that are monocultural with a shared experience [it] comes down to ‘how have we lost our identity?’ America is so unique, because yes, there is a unique history, but now we have all these differences. We have lost a common identity.”

Cydney Kirkpatrick, junior public health major, points to lines that have been drawn since the United States was founded. She is involved on campus working as a commuter representative for ASCBU and is secretary for the United Club. Earlier, in the fall semester, ASCBU hosted a political event in partnership with Residence Life to create a platform for communication.

“We’re politically divided. Racially divided. We’ve been through so much, but we still can’t see each other as equals,” Kirkpatrick says. “We’re under the same government, but we can’t see each other as equals.”

She argued that division is something

you can avoid by pretending it does not exist. One reason for the felt division is an inability to communicate.

“Politics comes down to race because that’s what it was built upon,” Kirkpatrick says. “You try to stray from that but you can’t stray away from the only thing you know. People don’t like to talk about it. But how are we going to get our problems solved if we don’t talk about it? Just like in a relationship, you need communication. Right now we’re a nation without communication.”

During the ASCBU-sponsored event, students had the chance to become educated

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on local propositions, learn about each presidential candidate and their party’s history and ask political questions to a small panel. Kirkpatrick had just joined ASCBU and did not have a role in planning the event but did, however, praise on-campus events that provide a space for politics to be discussed in constructive ways.

Kirkpatrick notes it is important to start with a positive setting, simultaneously

addressing the shortcomings of exclusively having individual interactions.

“Personal conversation is good but it’s not enough,” Kirkpatrick says.

Larger groups, she explains, help avoid conversations devolving into personal attacks. Kirkpatrick says it is absolutely necessary to have hard discussions.

“If it matters in a small relationship, it matters with a nation,” she says. She also mentions how people may opt out but the conversation will still take place and will still be relevant to citizens.

Citizenship is a state of being, either by default or design.

“Whether or not you’re active or inactive, you are American. It pertains to you,” says John HaHyung Lee, junior applied theology major. Lee agrees that it is critical to speak one’s mind in the public sphere, especially for people of faith.

“It’s important to have those conversations because it does affect things more than people let on,” Lee says. “The fact that we have a voice in our government is a privilege and a unique position for Christians.”

He says being jaded or cynical about systems actually does citizens a disservice, especially if they refuse to speak up.

“What you’ve effectively done is remove yourself from the conversation and perpetuate echo chambers,” Lee says. “There’s a certain responsibility to come out and be firm, but gracious. I just want my name in the game. The usefulness isn’t convincing anyone that I’m right; it’s to accurately represent a certain viewpoint.”

Lee says he has experience with heated conversations.

“I went to a predominantly secular and highly intellectual high school — the number two public high school in the nation at the time,” he says.

Lee was a Lincoln Douglas Debater and has two friends who currently attend Harvard and Princeton.

“We’re friends first. We don’t let our political allegiances affect our friendship. We talk frequently, and I think those conversations are important,” he says.

Relationships, Lee says, are the crux of constructive conversations. It is the relationships Lee has developed with his friends that have caused them to not only seek out his difference of opinion, but to also defend him on their own campuses as someone who is thoughtful and compassionate.

Lee says that healing divisions that exist is about having healthy conversations, which stem from humility, empathy and a desire to learn. Instead of trying to control a conversation by being condescending and shoving answers in people’s faces, seek to ask more questions.

“Some people try to water a small plant using a fire hydrant. When you do that, you remove the possibility for all future conversations,” he says.

He continues by pointing out that anytime people disagree there is going to be a tension, but that is OK. He says diffusing that tension is about “reading people and having specific goals that don’t involve being right. That’s coming from a speech and debate guy. Not all conversations have to be a debate.”

Not talking about division does not make it go away. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that “true peace is not merely the absence of tension: It is the presence of justice.” In the shared life of citizens, the only way to seek and learn what is just for a pluralistic community is a commitment to listen, learn, love and respect.

We cannot start by reducing our neighbor as a tiny face, with an opinion in the comments section on our social media apps. Unity is not uniformity. It is a dedication to search beyond the lines that our differences draw. It is to see our brothers and sisters as humans whose stories matter. ♦