

What Underpins Political Polarization?

By Richard Cherwitz

December 10, 2019.

It's well-documented that the United States is more politically polarized than ever, at least in modern times. The question of impeachment is but one more illustration of this reality, with each side of the debate being locked into its position. It would seem there is simply no evidence or reason capable of moving either camp out of its silo.

In the last few weeks the underlying cause of this problem is becoming clearer. The culprit may not be political but epistemological polarization — a claim that resonates with the thesis of Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum in their new book, "A Lot of People are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy." Let me explain.

For months I have closely monitored media interviews of and statements by Republican House and Senate members. Aside from believing that the Republican leaders seem incapable of defending Trump's threatening the president of Ukraine, I am amazed at how they conflate "fact" and "opinion."

On Sunday December 1, for example, Louisiana Republican Senator John Kennedy could not answer a simple and nonpolitical question raised by NBC's Chuck Todd following Kennedy's repeating a debunked

conspiracy theory: When does an opinion become a fact? Kennedy was literally dumbfounded by the question. We should not be surprised.

Put bluntly, our country is confronted with a serious epistemological crisis — a problem about what counts as knowledge. This is a subject that as a rhetorician I have spent more than 40 years as a faculty member studying and about which I even wrote a book (“Communication and Knowledge: An Investigation in Rhetorical Epistemology”) and published numerous scholarly articles in my discipline’s academic journals.

Drawing on my research, I contend that, like the ancient Sophists, many contemporary relativists and postmodern thinkers, Republicans in 2019 treat everything that is said as having equal epistemological merit and value — that there is no categorical philosophical difference between “belief” and knowledge.” In short, if belief and knowledge are not segregated, politicians can indiscriminately claim that their opposition’s “facts” are merely “opinions” — and be successful rhetorically, getting away with such an assertion. Hence, this tendency constitutes a far more serious and inherent national problem from which political polarization may arise.

So how do we escape this epistemological crisis that contaminates the political landscape?

Until people are willing to refrain from knee-jerk political reactions, engaging instead in a thoughtful philosophical discussion about what counts as “truth,” the nation’s current partisan and polarized state will remain — something preventing productive debate, progress in solving problems and restoration of deliberative democracy.

To be clear, I am not calling for a tedious debate among scholars. To the contrary. This philosophical (lower case “p”) issue must not be exclusively an academic conversation restricted to professional

Philosophers (upper case “P”) occupying the ivory tower. It must take place in the public square. Issues about what is true and what isn’t, after all, have always guided the decision-making of ordinary citizens and impacted our nonpolitical lives.

I sincerely believe Americans are troubled and exhausted by political polarization, worrying about the hateful rhetoric it spawns. I remain hopeful most of us will be eager to engage in this epistemological discussion — thus extricating us from the crisis stalemating democratic governance.

Richard Cherwitz is Ernest A. Sharpe Centennial Professor Emeritus, Moody College of Communication, and founding director, Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium at the University of Texas in Austin.