



Searching for productive disagreement in a time of division

By Sens. Chris Coons (D-Del) and Marco Rubio (R-Fla) | Wednesday, October 25, 2023

Differing parties and governing philosophies do not have to stop elected officials from working together — the two of us are proof of that. In fact, we introduced our very first piece of legislation together: the American Growth, Recovery, Empowerment, and Entrepreneurship Act, or AGREE Act, a pragmatic approach to putting politics aside and creating jobs through commonsense, bipartisan solutions.

More than a decade later, last month, we debated each other before a national audience. No, we are not running for president. Instead, we were attempting to model productive disagreement across party lines.

We were brought together by the Bipartisan Policy Center, the Edward M. Kennedy Institute, and the Orrin G. Hatch Foundation. Like us, Sens. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Hatch (R-Utah) were from different parties and held different views on important issues. Nevertheless, they found ways to work together. Is that type of relationship possible today?

The answer isn't obvious, especially when indictments, investigations and shutdowns dominate our political news. We are proud of our record of working together in the U.S. Senate, where over the past 13 years, we have passed legislation to boost our economy, increase college affordability, support Israel, and draw attention to the dangers of the Wagner Group. However, we recognize that too often in this body, gridlock and speechifying carry the day, not regular order, cooperation or debate.

These are symptoms of deeper, systemic problems. After all, our politics is a mirror that reflects our broader society. Congress is polarized because America is polarized. Our disagreements are not imaginary; they derive from real problems inflicting real pain on real people. Those problems are not easy to solve.

Unfortunately, the more frustrated Americans become with their political system, the more dangerous our situation becomes, as the threats we face are not merely internal. Other countries and leaders watch our news and think America is falling apart. They think we are on the verge of a civil war; that we are about to implode. That either invites our adversaries to act against us or encourages adventurism across the globe — and in some cases, it does both.

In short, things are bad.

This is not a call for despair, however. To the contrary, our ability to engage in substantial, but civil debate before a live audience reminded us that hope remains for our system. It also reminded us that our system is worth fighting for.

America is the most diverse society in human history, yet we come together under one flag. Our adversaries see this as a weakness; they say the only path to order and prosperity lies through forced conformity. That is why it was important for us to stand before our nation, side by side, in pursuit of a common goal.

On stage, we recognized that we could hold our opinions strongly without it impacting how we feel about each other. We found overlapping interests and areas of agreement — more of them than you might think. Ultimately we uplifted our shared identity as Americans, rather than merely identifying as Democrat or Republican.

If we, as a nation, can turn that shared identity into unified action, we will show our adversaries that “e pluribus unum” is more than a slogan. We will show that disagreement can be productive, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people — messy as it is — is a real alternative to tyranny.

For this to happen, though, we need to have debate and deliberation. Americans need to hear why this approach to China or that approach to climate is superior. Elected officials need to make the case for what they advocate, publicly and in member-to-member conversations. News outlets need to cover them. Voters need to engage.

Neither of us is calling for a go-along-to-get-along attitude that ignores the very real divisions in our country. However, we are committed to rebuilding and strengthening America. We disagree, sometimes strongly, on the best approach to do that, but we both agree that failure is not an option. After all, if we fail, we will prove our adversaries right.

Let us pray that never happens and let us all do our best to practice politics as President Abraham Lincoln admonished us to: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, [and] with firmness in the right — as God gives us to see the right.”

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