

# MOVING TOWARD RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENT

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Respectful engagement in political discourse is central to a healthy democracy. Respectful engagement occurs when:

- People *engage* with each other—when they share not only their past experiences and perspectives, but also their current hopes and expectations—for themselves as individuals and for society as a whole.
- People *respect* each other—when they actually listen to what the other says, starting with the assumptions that (a) the other person has reasons for their opinions that are at least as sincerely and deeply held as one’s own beliefs and reasons, and (b) the other is seeking some good to the best of their ability to perceive good.

Respectful engagement allows all voices to be heard so that people learn from each other. The learning needs to be continual, as assumptions are tested, adjusted, and re-tested in the light of new experiences and understandings. Respectful engagement shares decision-making power and enables problems to be solved before they get out of hand and create social disorder. Because it builds mutual understanding and caring, it builds strong social cohesion.

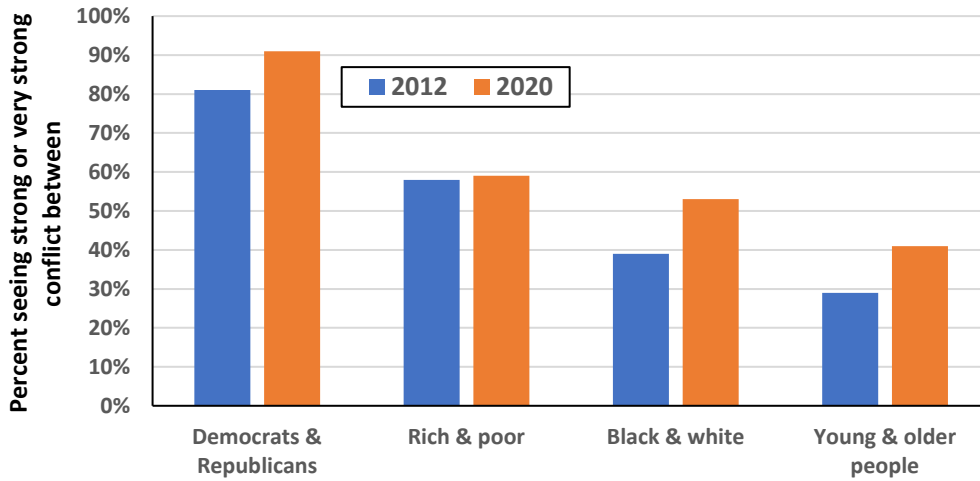
In many ways, that is not what we see currently. To the extent that people of differing opinions engage at all today, it is often with a lack of respect. Communication between people of different beliefs, especially those most active in politics, is often about forming and hardening divisions rather than building connections and understanding.

This has contributed to increased polarization in the United States. A Pew Research Center poll from March 2020 had 91 percent of respondents saying there is a strong or very strong conflict between Democrats and Republicans. This compares to only 59 percent who gave the same answer for conflicts between rich and poor, 53 percent for conflicts between black and white people, and 41 percent for conflicts between young people and older people. (See Exhibit 1.)

The political divide has grown in recent years—in 2012, the percent who saw a strong or very strong conflict between members of the two parties was 81.

### Exhibit 1

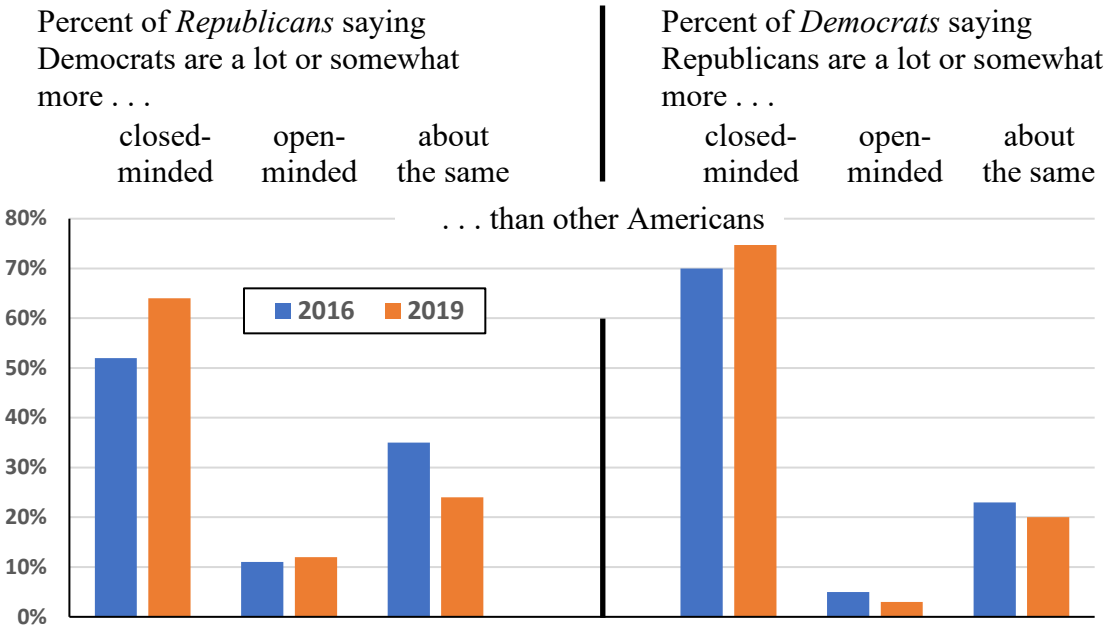
**More people see a strong or very strong conflict between Democrats and Republicans than between other groups in society.**



SOURCE: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/04/far-more-americans-see-very-strong-partisan-conflicts-now-than-in-the-last-two-presidential-election-years/>, viewed June 21, 2020.

### Exhibit 2

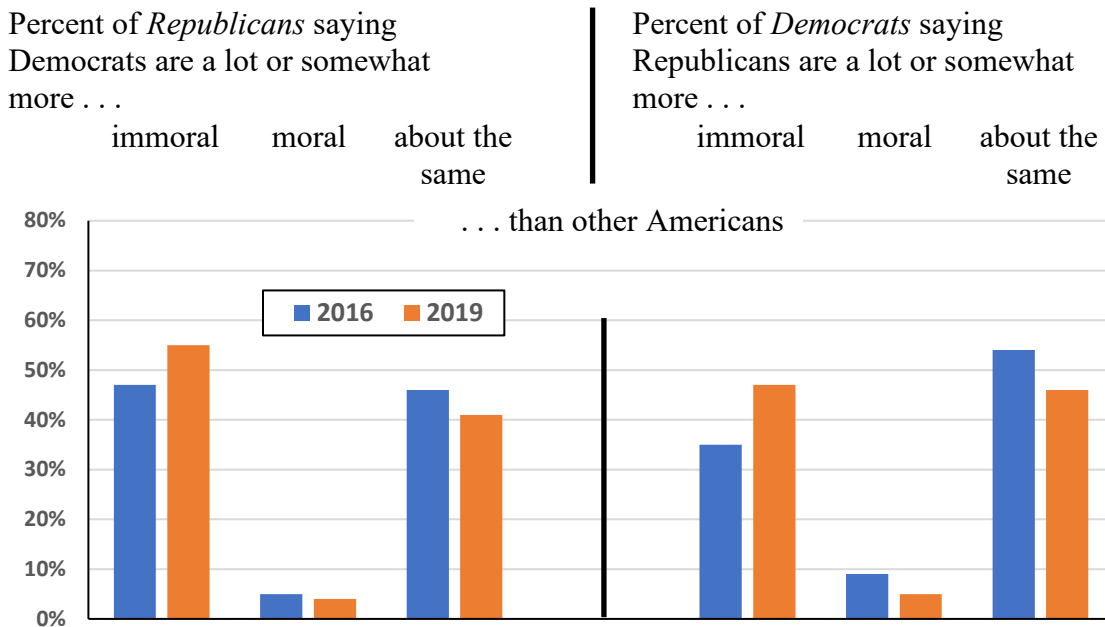
**Republicans and Democrats increasingly see each other as *closed-minded*.**



SOURCE: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/how-partisans-view-each-other/>, viewed 7/19/20; see also <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/06/06-22-16-Partisanship-and-animosity-release.pdf>, viewed 9/15/20.

### Exhibit 3

#### Republicans and Democrats increasingly see each other as *immoral*.



SOURCE: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/how-partisans-view-each-other/>, viewed 7/19/20; see also <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/06/06-22-16-Partisanship-and-animosity-release.pdf>, viewed 9/15/20.

Not only is there conflict, but survey respondents increasingly view the other side as closed-minded and immoral. From 2016 to 2019, the percentage of Democrats who think Republicans are more closed-minded than the general public grew from 70 to 75 percent, while the percentage of Republicans who thought the same about Democrats grew from 52 percent to 64 percent (Exh. 2). In 2016, 47 percent of Republicans and 35 percent of Democrats said they believed members of the other party are more immoral than other Americans. In three short years, those numbers had grown to 55 percent and 47 percent, respectively (Exh. 3).

The increased polarization is troubling, but this moment also brings opportunity. There is growing awareness that our society has divisions that keep it from functioning as a whole, and with that comes a desire for solutions.

In current discussions, misinformation has gained considerable focus as one cause of division. Part of the gulf between groups is that disagreements extend beyond policy proposals

and applications of facts to the underlying facts themselves. The Covid-19 pandemic in particular underlines this, as people’s understanding of how the disease spreads, its severity, and how to counter it often differs based on political leanings.<sup>1</sup>

The response to this is often to look at sources of misinformation along with methods to present correct information, with the idea that if misinformation can be blocked at the source or quickly corrected, then people will not be led into error. The role of social media in spreading misinformation is particularly emphasized in these discussions.<sup>2</sup>

While the source and content of information and the media through which information passes are certainly important, we believe that equally important is the information receiver’s willingness to practice respectful engagement.

Make no mistake about it: We believe all sides—information providers as well as receivers—ought to engage respectfully. But even if people on one side, in this case information providers, do not proceed respectfully, information receivers can do their part to hold society together by maintaining respect and attempting to raise the level of discourse.

Even when information is presented in an aggressive and hostile way, listeners can decide what their priorities are when they respond. A response designed to find common ground and strengthen community will differ from one designed to foster divisiveness and satisfy one’s ego. A community-focused response will seek to build understanding and look to find shared priorities that may be hidden in the other side’s rhetoric. Such a response would be based on the belief that even people we disagree with have worth and may have goals for their community similar to our own.

Persuasion is not always possible, but it becomes more likely when we find common ground rather than further divides. Building a rapport and using empathy are better tools than the easy putdown or the emotionally charged insult.<sup>3</sup> Interpersonal bonds and empathy are the tools of a respectful community.

Saying society should operate with these tools is not the same as making it happen. It takes work and willingness to explore different perspectives. CEPA recently re-released a report called “*They Would Smile*,”<sup>4</sup> which takes a multifaceted look at changing the ways people think about and engage with each other. Future essays here will continue developing this theme.

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<sup>1</sup>For example, a July 2021 YouGov poll found that 74 percent of Democratic respondents viewed getting Covid as a larger risk than side effects of the vaccine, while 54 percent of Republicans named vaccine effects as the larger risk. In the same survey, 52 percent of self-identified liberals said they were very worried or somewhat worried about their personal risk of contracting Covid-19, while only 29 percent of self-identified conservatives felt that same worry. <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/w2znmwpsq0/econTabReport.pdf#page31>, viewed November 7, 2021.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Allcott, Hunt, Gentzkow, Matthew, & Yu, Chuan (2019), Trends in the diffusion of misinformation on social media. *Research and Politics*, April-June 2019, 1-8. Viewed at [https://scholar.google.com/scholar\\_url?url=https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2053168019848554&hl=en&sa=X&ei=TyXuYcPfleqUy9YPo7ecUA&scisig=AAGBfm1yYfqTm4thkU\\_xRltNGxYGtnUxTw&oi=scholar](https://scholar.google.com/scholar_url?url=https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2053168019848554&hl=en&sa=X&ei=TyXuYcPfleqUy9YPo7ecUA&scisig=AAGBfm1yYfqTm4thkU_xRltNGxYGtnUxTw&oi=scholar), January 23, 2022.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, information in the article at <https://www.vox.com/2016/11/23/13708996/argue-better-science>, viewed March 6, 2022.

<sup>4</sup>This report is available at <https://inclusion.com/product/they-would-smile/>