

other view

Dubuque can set an example for political discourse, civility

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Dubuque is famously nice, but our country seems more and more divided politically. Is there a disconnect between Dubuque and the nation as a whole?

Research by a team of Loras College students and faculty suggests that these divisions are part of our community but they can be repaired.

Our national political divisions seem intractable, with “liberals” scolding “conservatives” for the greed they imagine motivates them, and “conservatives” writing off “liberals” as manipulative and out of touch. Neither side wants to talk to the other, though we can find plenty of shouting matches in the media and in campaigns.

This condition seems reflected in our data, which indicates that Democrats have a mix of “somewhat negative” and “strongly negative” view of Republicans, while Democratic Socialists have “strongly negative” view of them. Meanwhile, Republicans have a mix of “negative” and “strongly negative” views of Democrats and strongly negative views of Democratic Socialists.

But we live in a democratic system, a way of governing that emphasizes respect for everyone and the right to speak.

The Loras College team developed The Social Climate Survey of Dubuque to explore a range of attitudes in Dubuque, not only political but also attitudes related to religious difference, heritage and ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. It is not yet a truly representative sample. We find that strong national divisions are reflected here but may not be hopelessly entrenched.

Preliminary data suggests perceptions can be softened by direct experience on the local level.

National data indicates that partisan perceptions of other groups is

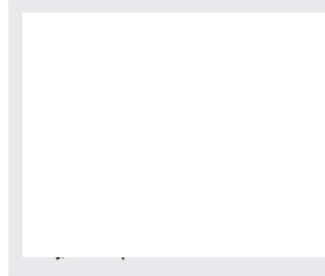
often misinformed, exaggerated and based on archetypes. For example, in national data, Democrats assumed that over 38 percent of Republicans earn more than \$250,000, while in fact only 2.2 percent of them do. Similarly, Republicans believed that over 39 percent of Democrats belong to a labor union while only 10.5 percent of them do.

So far, results of our survey echo such divided perceptions, with 69 percent of Democratic participants holding negative feelings toward Republicans and 72 percent of Republican participants holding negative feelings about Democrats.

As political identities move further toward the margins, attitudes become even more divided. 90 percent of Democratic Socialists report having negative feelings, while 55 percent of Democrats and 26 percent of Independents view Tea Party Republicans in a negative way. 73 percent of Democrats have positive feelings towards the Democratic Socialist party. 95 percent of participating Republicans view Democratic Socialism negatively. 100 percent of the Tea Party viewed the Democratic Socialist negatively. Independents, who made up 22 percent of participants, have predominantly negative view of both Tea Party Republicans and Democratic Socialists, but are more moderately inclined toward Democrats and Republicans.

Such striking divisions are concerning. Do we need to dislike another person or condemn their identity because it is different from our own? Do such habits of division keep us from understanding our society as a whole? While it is natural for political parties to seek power, there is wide agreement that a noncompetitive setting with a single party in control of all governance would be bad for the country. The bitterness we see at this moment is unhealthy and unnecessary.

The Swiss writer Jean Jacques Rousseau warned his contemporaries that partisanship is the enemy of democracy because it leads to division



rather than dialogue and collaboration. Alexis de Tocqueville declared that Americans could be prone to the “tyranny of the majority.” Both of them perceived some of the challenges that democratic systems like ours might pose, but neither really offered solutions.

A Jewish Galilean peasant in the first century, Jesus of Nazareth, provided a compelling model: He sat down to eat and chat with people with whom he disagreed, and he encouraged his followers to forgive their opponents.

Our survey reveals that, of the Dubuquers who participated, both Republicans and Democrats are open to conversations with people they disagree with. Surprisingly, it also suggests that they are open to family members entering into romantic relationships with people of the other party, seemingly contrary to the national trend for people of differing political views avoiding politically mixed relationships.

Dubuque’s niceness does not have to be skin-deep. People in Dubuque are able to see the humanity and dignity of others despite strident differences, so while we are caught in a whirlpool of national partisanship, let’s work toward setting an example of dialogue, respect and thoughtful variety.

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