



Political Contempt is Chilling Free Speech

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Americans still largely believe in the right to free speech — but they are simultaneously less likely to exercise it than they have been in the past.

And it's not hard to see why.

According to a recent Cato survey on the topic, nearly three-fourths of Americans say that “political correctness” has significantly silenced political speech on important issues. A quick look at universities across the nation demonstrate this chilling effect in action, as “controversial” speakers are routinely shouted down, silenced and even subjected to violent protests. Once-tolerant universities have become mob-led enclaves for one-sided political “correctness” — where dissenting views are not just discouraged, but actively targeted for explicit censorship.

This intolerance of dissent is not unique to America's left-leaning universities. Increasingly, businesses and even individuals are finding themselves the victims of self-proclaimed and politically motivated speech police.

The result has been the systematic sabotage of our political discourse. More and more Americans, Cato's research shows, are censoring their own political speech out of fear of incurring the wrath of neighbors, colleagues and even friends.

And that fear isn't necessarily misplaced. Political rivalries have become heated in the age of social media and personality-driven cable news. According to the same poll, nearly two-thirds of Hillary Clinton's voters agree that it's “hard” to be friends with outspoken Donald-Trump voters. But this reluctance to tolerate freedom of speech isn't the mere result of political differences. In fact, nothing about division is extraordinary to our times.

What is extraordinary, however, is the level of contempt our political tribes have fostered against anyone that diverges from their view of “correct” political thinking.

When a political tribe repeatedly tells its followers that everyone who disagrees is out to destroy the lives of innocent Americans, sooner or later some folks are going to start believing it. As such, it only makes sense that someone who cast their vote for Hillary might have difficulty treating a candid Trump voter cordially. After all, they've been told repeatedly that Trump's voters are “deplorable” individuals.

It's a tactic that fosters a dangerous level of contempt among otherwise congenial and courteous Americans.

The demonization of anyone who disagrees with a prescribed political faction has proven to be a driving force behind the violent censorship we see happening in many corners of our society — whether it be the violence we witness at political rallies, Antifa riots throughout the nation or university students literally chasing speakers off campus.

When looking for the source of this violent censorship we see taking root in America, there's a tendency to blame the political types who fan the political fires — but to do so ignores the reason hate-peddling is profitable in the first place.

“Whether or not we want to admit it, political hate is a demand-driven phenomenon,” explains American Enterprise Institute President Arthur Brooks. “We are the ones creating a big market for it.”

In short: ambitious elites have realized that there are profits in promoting intolerance within the American public, primarily because we eat it up with a spoon.

Thus it doesn't look like we're doing a very good job of preparing the younger generation to reject such contempt-driven politics.

More than two thirds of college students believe “bias reporting” — where students can anonymously report “offensive” speech to authorities — to be a valuable tool. It's a mentality that is eerily reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984 big-brother dystopia.

As a result, Americans are less and less willing to engage in policy debate, for fear of being “reported” to a political faction eager to tar and feather them for daring to entertain dissenting thoughts.

Such a tyranny of political “correctness” is something that Thomas Jefferson, in his first Inaugural Address, warned against.

“Having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions.”

If Americans truly embrace the concept of free speech and expression, we must do more than pay these principles lip service.

First, we must address the reflexive contempt we may have for those who dare to think differently. Intelligent and compassionate human beings can often disagree on important matters. They shouldn't be pilloried — or “reported” — for doing so.