



Why we can't get along: Partisan news sources report totally different facts

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Unfortunately, the gridlock in Washington and Augusta is not resolved by the political rhetoric. Partisan affiliations still obscure the real problem.

Some months ago I wrote about the experience of Nebraska State Sen. Laura Ebke, who is a Republican activist in private life but had to run without a party label on the ballot and serves in a legislature without political party caucus. Without party discipline, she said, lawmaking is accomplished by coalitions around specific issues instead of a party line.

Cato Institute Vice President Gene Healy demonstrated clearly in a recent essay how clear thinking on specific issues gets skewed by the lens of party affiliation, which fails to discern even basic facts.

“Alas, political tribalism warps people’s perceptions of basic reality, convincing partisans they’re entitled to their own facts. That’s not new, nor is it limited to one side of the political spectrum,” he wrote.

Healy gave a striking example: In a 1988 survey, more than half of self-identified “strong Democrats” believed that inflation had increased under Republican President Ronald Reagan when, in fact, it had actually come down by 10 percent.

In a 1996 survey half of the self-identified “strong Republicans” believed that Democrat President Bill Clinton had increased the deficit, although it actually had dropped during his terms in office.

Knee-jerk partisanship blinded the respondents to the facts.

“In the battle between facts and partisanship, partisanship always wins,” noted Massachusetts Institute of Technology political science professor Adam J. Berinsky.

We see this in the news all the time. Partisan blinkers prevent real negotiations based on a common set of facts in both Washington and Augusta. Often, the political affiliation of the author automatically dooms a bill to the scrapheap without any discourse or investigation.

The problem is exacerbated when society is not exposed to the same set of facts from which to apply their personal approach.

On a recent trip to visit family and friends, I discovered the partisan slant of the households without talking politics. Where they leaned right, the TV was on Fox News Network all day. Where they leaned left, MSNBC droned in the background.

So I did an experiment when I returned home. During a 24-hour news cycle, I spent a third of the time with only Fox, a third with only MSNBC and a third with mainstream media.

My finding was shocking. The reason neither side could conduct civil conversation is because they lack a common information source. Stories that Fox deemed the most important were never reported on MSNBC and vice versa. There is a segment of involved voters who skew their information filtered by their choice of media.

Disagreement is healthy. We want public officials who stand for core principles. But to reach consensus they need to be working from the same basic facts and data. And then they need the listening skills to at least hear what the other side has to say without pre-judgement before a sentence is completed.

My best conversations are with an old friend who is 180-degrees opposite of my political philosophy. But we're both students of the process of politics, rather than ideology. We can discuss pros and cons of specific issues, and we can discuss which public official handled it correctly and which erred because we're not defending a party line.

Alas, that is not always possible.

In conversations with otherwise well-informed individuals their party loyalty often deters civil discussion. Mention the name Obama in the preface, and a staunch Republican immediately goes into defensive mode without even hearing the issue. In Maine, the mere mention of the name LePage will cause a staunch Democrat to go into debate stance before hearing the idea to be expressed.

Municipal government works far more representatively of the populace because members of a town council do not have party labels on the ballot. Voters are more prone to listen to candidates' thoughts about specific issues rather than to view them through partisan lenses. And councilors form blocs which vary from issue to issue rather than on strict party discipline.

Perhaps we should consider the Nebraska model to break the back of political party control over the workings of government, which should serve all people regardless of their voter registration.