

The Miscellany News

Conservatives aren't right, but they aren't dumb either

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We Democrats have a habit of shooting ourselves in the foot.

I recently worked on a group project in which we had to give a full-period presentation on affirmative action, an issue on which many people hold extremely strong opinions. One of my partners suggested that we have the class hold a debate with assigned sides: pro- and anti-affirmative action. My other partner spouted that a debate is a terrible idea because everyone in the class has the same opinion and there's no real argument against affirmative action. I was stunned by this. Opposing affirmative action isn't a far-right position: half of Republicans believe it's harmful and even 16 percent of Democrats think the same (NPR, "How Americans Feel About Affirmative Action In Higher Education," 11.01.2018). To ignore the fact that there are arguments about it, to stick our heads in the sand and pretend whatever it is we want has support because we really want to believe it does, is just plain folly.

I consider myself to be quite progressive. Outside of Vassar I am almost always the most liberal person in the room. And yet, on this campus, I often find myself feeling belittled whenever I voice any sort of respect toward or understanding of the conservative half of the country. I don't agree with Republicans or conservative values, but I have fought to understand the reasoning behind these positions and why half of this country holds the positions it does.

Even if we don't agree with conservatives, we need to understand where their beliefs come from in order to best counter their points. Instead of saying that they're dumb and we knew better, it's more effective to address the root causes of their anxieties. For instance, if someone opposes liberal immigration policies it might not be that they are racist and hate foreigners, but instead that they believe that immigrants are dangerous. This can be countered factually, and we can show that immigrants are less dangerous than the general populace (Cato Institute, "Illegal Immigrants and Crime – Assessing the Evidence," 03.04.2019). If we understand conservatives we can pushback in terms that they understand. Instead of saying that imprisoning children at the border is inhumane, we say that it betrays the founding ideals of the United States, and instead of saying affirmative action is "just right" we can say that it gives people bootstraps by which to pull themselves up.

Saying, "Well, Republicans are just dumb!" is not an argument. We only harm ourselves and our causes by comments like this.

Making broad generalizations about almost half of the country is reductive, and antithetical to any political success, at best. Their beliefs and ideas are not stupid. I disagree with them just as much as you do but the mere fact that I disagree with a set of beliefs does not mean that those beliefs are not worthy of consideration. When you attempt to invalidate right-wing beliefs by

simply disregarding them, you harm your own stance's validity. Do you understand the opposition to your own beliefs? Why do you believe what you say you believe? Is it because you've never been exposed to or never considered anything else? These are the questions I ask myself whenever I hear someone call anything that is not progressive "dumb."

If we want to successfully argue for our beliefs, we need to justify why what we believe is correct. We must show that we understand the other side. This country is so divided because everyone is so filled with anger—anger fueled by neither side listening to what the other has to say. I'm not saying that we need to listen because what they are saying might be right; I'm saying that we need to listen because we can only have a strong argument when we can understand and therefore address and overcome the opposition.

If we are going to win the 2020 elections, we need to be able to understand our opposition's point of view. We must champion a common cause: the removal of Donald Trump and his followers from the White House.

Vassar is a haven of progressivism. It attracts similarly minded liberal people, but that does not mean that we can sit back and bask in our own liberalism—to do so, and to target one another, is to accept our comfort and privilege in this safe haven away from the realities of conservative ruling power. We can't simply accept the progressive views we hold as gospel without considering why someone might disagree. By welcoming the opposition, we will be able to return to our beliefs with stronger and more sound justification. I know that certainly some Vassar students come from conservative backgrounds, and they may think that they've had enough conservative values for their lifetime. But learning and connecting are ongoing processes, a muscle that requires constant exercise. So let's stop shooting each other down simply because one of us wants to bring right-wing arguments into the conversation. Let's stop shooting ourselves in the feet.