Jose Angel Solórzano

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Intergroup Political Communication in Contemporary America

When writing the Federalist Papers, the Founding Fathers’ aim was to encourage communication during conflicts between the two major political groups in America. The state of politics in America today assures that they did their job damn well. Since president Donald Trump has been in office, both the Democrats and Republicans have traded figurative punches at each other in just about any way imaginable. One issue that is causing a large amount of intergroup conflict among the parties is whether or not Donald Trump should be impeached. Both groups have been at each other’s throats about this for the majority of Trump’s presidency but the conflict is reaching its peak now that Democrats have created an official impeachment inquiry.

Both parties are doing their best to get their message across to the ordinary American, but in doing so are damaging the image and reputation of the other party, and of the state of America’s politics as a whole. A CNN article posted on December 6th tells of how the White House reacted to the impeachment inquiry that the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives has drafted. The article illustrates an intergroup communication problem between the Democrats and the Republicans in our government today, in which the hyperpartisanship leads to partisan group behavior in political communication, party identification as a social identity and depersonalization of politicians from the other party.

Over the past decade, America’s politics have evolved to a form of identity politics where both parties’ strong identification has lead their party identity taking over as a major social identity of not only politicians, but to a vast amount of American citizens as well. When an individual sees their opposite as a member of another group and not an individual, this leads to depersonalization and stereotyping of a certain group. When people see one dimension of their identity as more important than the rest, they also begin to see themselves as less of an individual and more as a group member. This effect has been chipping away at the legitimacy of American government because both parties resort to generalizing anybody who is not in their group and begin to see any viewpoint besides their own as an existential threat to their own identity. This results in American politics that are more combative and confrontational than ever. When both groups are at each other’s throats as much as they are now, the ordinary American people, those who the government officials should be serving, are the ones who suffer the most from a divided and inefficient government. The government was set up for both parties to challenge each other to ensure a competitive democracy, both parties were supposed to challenge the other’s ideas and come up with better ones that they believe will help out the country even more. Because party identification as a social identity has become so widespread, the parties do not even challenge each other’s ideas and instead dismiss them entirely simply because they belong to another group.

The aforementioned article is a perfect example of this because it reports on how the Republican White House reacted to the Democrat House’s impeachment inquiry. The House of Representatives set a deadline for the White House to answer whether or not they would be participating in the impeachment hearings, and the White House replied by calling the impeachment hearing completely baseless and a reckless abuse of power. Because of this stereotyping and depersonalization, both parties have been prime examples of hyperpartisan group behavior in political communication. By shrugging off any attacks by the opposite party and claiming they are the only legitimate party in government, both groups are weakening the strength of the democracy in our country. Republicans claim that Democrats are damaging our democracy, and Democrats say Republicans are damaging our democracy. Interestingly enough, both are right. Because of these never ending attacks on each other, both parties are seemingly weaker than ever. When the two major parties of America’s government are weaker than ever, the government of America as a whole follows and all Americans have to suffer the consequences of intergroup conflict in American government.

Attempting to resolve the intense conflict between the Democrats and Republicans seems like an impossible task, but the fact that ordinary citizens aren’t as on the extremes of the political spectrum as the politicians who are supposed to represent them, may offer some hope. To resolve the issue of hyperpartisanship of America’s politicians can be solved in a way that the Founding Fathers would have hoped an issue of this sort to be resolved. To resolve this issue both groups can simply communicate with each other, make their political party identification less salient and look at only the facts regarding the Donald Trump impeachment inquiry. A way to do this would to force the politicians to have one on one conversations with each other, without the eyes of the nation watching. This will lead to the politicians realizing that the other group has more in common than they have realized because this will lead to them seeing each other as fellow individual politicians who are meant to serve this country and protect our democracy. As of now, when there is a new revelation regarding the case, both of the sides look at the facts through a biased lens that focuses not on the truth, but on how the facts can be twisted to create a more favorable situation for their political party. This kind of communication between parties is not what the Founding Fathers saw as the answer to issues of such grave importance, they recognized that in moments where the government is so uneven, the only way to unite the country was to look at one another as fellow Americans and attempt to work something out together with only the interests of their constituents in mind. Although it may seem very simple, if politicians simply communicate with those of another party, without having the pressure of legitimizing their party, it would be easier to get a truth where the biases of both parties are set aside and only facts remain. This communication should be done behind closed doors, because being on national television adds to the need to attack the other party. Without feeling forced to bombard the other party with attacks, the politicians can strip down the details of the case and look at the laws are relevant to the issue to collaborate and create a version of reality that is bias free and that does not aim to hurt any party. Self-categorization theory is a theory on how individuals begin to see themselves in terms of the categories one belongs to. Depersonalization occurs when individuals see others as group members, and not as individuals. By communicating with each other honestly and with only the interests of the citizens in mind, the politicians can reverse this trend of depersonalization that has been making American politics so divided and can help mediate the conflict by talking to each other with a collaborative mindset and not a combative mindset.

Considering the state of American politics, asking politicians to communicate with each other like regular people trying to come to a conclusion which is beneficial to off may seem an impossible task. Politicians are motivated by their own interest to be re-elected, and to be accepted into the party they identify with. The proposed solution is limited because politicians have many things to consider when making decisions which will be seen my their constituents, and by the fellow party members. If a politician indeed agrees to set aside the bias and collaborate with the other party by communicating, this may be perceived by the citizens and by the rest of the party as being disloyal to the interests of the groups they belong to. This open communication between parties can serve as an effective way of alleviating the intergroup conflicts plaguing the American government, but it may be the case that too much is at stake for the politicians to drop their bias and attempt to reach a non bias consensus.

The possible impeachment of a president may indeed be one of the most polarizing issues imaginable in American government. Today both groups, Republicans and Democrats, have turned their backs on the American people by choosing to be at each other’s throats instead of attempting to resolve this issue and work on helping the citizenry. This issue of depersonalization in American politics has lead to heavy biases and partisan group behavior in politics, and if left unchecked, will continue to weaken the democracy of America. This intergroup problem is important because it has lead to a state of affairs where nobody knows what is true any more because both sides have chosen to place their own interests ahead of the interests of the American people. To develop better solutions to these problems we can start asking questions regarding whether or not politicians have to be so partisan, and whether it is possible to resolve hyper-partisan issues in ways where both parties work together. It may be tricky, but the Founding Fathers knew that things would get hectic, maybe not this hectic, but they believed that honest and deliberative communication between the parties was what this country’s democracy would depend on in times of existential conflict such as now.