Since its inception in Ancient Greece, the discipline of rhetoric — not to be confused with what’s often dismissed as “mere rhetoric” or the knack of sophistry,
which is making arguments in bad faith — has focused on the art of symbolic influence and persuasion.

As a scholar of communication and rhetorician, I argue that rhetoric can help us understand how Americans are speaking to each other about political issues. It can allow us to stand back from polarized beliefs and recognize the impact of our communication — and maybe reveal a productive path forward.

How so? Rhetorical analysis allows us to appreciate how those with whom we disagree nevertheless can be effective communicators. Rhetorical analysis exposes how speakers’ unstated messages often result in inferred messages, some of which embolden audience members to act. Rhetorical analysis reveals how what is omitted in a message is as significant as what is included.

For instance, research shows that speaking first can make it harder for the opposition to reply effectively. In March, President Trump’s preemptive response to the Mueller report may have given him a rhetorical advantage over the Democrats in the House of Representatives, making their sweeping demand for documents and witnesses seem like “presidential harassment.” Here, rhetorical analysis documents the strategic importance of message timing.

Or consider this: When women came forward to allege that Joe Biden’s intimacy made them feel uncomfortable, the former vice president made a joke on stage about it. That attempt at humor backfired. The rhetorical lesson for him and all politicians: Don’t let a 24-hour story turn into one that keeps on giving; each time you try to clean up a prior response guarantees additional media scrutiny. Rhetorical analysis teaches political candidates about how best to defuse charges of misbehavior.

I have also drawn on research pertaining to cognitive dissonance and persuasion to explain potential methods for Americans to find common ground, thus moving us beyond political differences and rendering compromise possible. Rhetorical analysis affords an opportunity to transcend political polarization.

These are just a few examples of what rhetoric can do. Sometimes, the very media we use now when we talk about politics encourages polarization. A thumbed-out tweet or stray comment on Facebook can be easily misconstrued, misinterpreted and misunderstood, and irresolvable bickering ensues. We return to our corners, convinced we’re right and you’re not.
But rhetoric provides some distance from that, as it encourages self-awareness about the ways we choose to communicate. Rather than spewing visceral diatribes that only serve to reflect the state of our political glands, understanding rhetoric affords us the opportunity for reflection and more deliberate speech. If we are able to achieve that, maybe our discourse will become more civil, and the chances for compromise will increase.

There might always be anonymous trolls lurking online whose only aim is to perturb, but many more of us are tired of the divisiveness that now dominates our political conversations. Instead of solving problems, we’re resolving disputes. Committing to the lessons of rhetoric could lead us out of this mess.

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