Moving Beyond Polarization in Order to Persuade [Opinion]

By Richard Cherwitz Sep. 13, 2018

I did not vote for Donald Trump. I regularly critique the president. I must confess, however, that every time I cast aspersions about Trump, I am faced with the selfish realization that during his tenure in office my 401(k) retirement account has grown. Whether that is directly due to Trump’s policies or simply correlated with his occupancy in the White House is not the issue — and perhaps cannot be proven.

What is noteworthy is that I often feel guilty for even wondering about or entertaining the thought that it might be more in my interest, and thus best to refrain from criticizing Trump, being content that as I approach retirement my financial future is solid.
I also worry that my open criticism of Trump risks hateful and threatening responses from anonymous readers. I hope my concern for ethics and morality ultimately will prevail. But I would be lying if I said this isn’t a constant struggle.

To be fair, my predicament is no different than that of others. Political scientists and those of us who study political communication have long observed that one of the oddities of human behavior is that people often behave in ways that contradict their own self-interests. One of the most recent and vivid examples of this is the proclivity of a large percentage of evangelicals to support a president of the United States whose words and deeds violate some of the most basic ethical tenets of Christianity.

My purpose in writing is not to condemn them; others already have done that, drawing attention to the fact that ethical principles are not only important but essential to Christianity. Rather, I wish to illustrate how all of us—including me—have a natural tendency to become rigid, allowing our narrower personal gains to outweigh what in our hearts we know is right and wrong.

What my confession, combined with the reference to the behavior of some evangelicals, reveals is that in politics and life we all experience what scholars in communication and psychology call “cognitive dissonance”—the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioral decisions and attitude change. The question is: How do we reduce dissonance?

Sometimes the answer is abandoning one of the incongruous beliefs. More often, the response is to prioritize which of our beliefs is more important. The latter, of course, can be an arduous process—the outcome of which others may not accept or understand.

From the standpoint of persuasion, it is a challenge to know how to convince some that they should alter how they prioritize their beliefs. Put differently, how do we capitalize on another’s dissonance as a tool for persuasion?

In my own case, friends frequently remind me that, while monetary gain and protecting myself from the hateful response of others are desirable goals, the cost of singularly pursuing these goals may not be worth the price of abandoning my moral and ethical convictions. In short, the issue for me becomes determining just how essential those ethical principles are to my identity as a human being.

And that is precisely the issue we must ask others—including evangelicals—to tackle and retackle. Rather than simply attacking them for being hypocrites, which will alienate them and has little chance of persuading, our responsibility is to recognize that like us they are fallible human beings capable of making erroneous judgments.

The best recourse, therefore, is to enable them to resolve their dissonance by finding common ground. For example, we might help them see how their ethical beliefs are
more than ordinary beliefs — how those beliefs ultimately define their Christian identity and are fundamental to their overarching mission of embodying and practicing Christianity.

My argument is not partisan. It is not a prescription for any specific political belief. It is a recommendation for respecting others and moving beyond the current hyper-polarization, all of which is necessary for the possibility of persuasion. This will not be easy. But without persuasion, which requires everyone — including me — to recognize that we might be wrong, what chance do we have as a society to survive?

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