

America: We're Not As Divided As We Think

By Chris Cox

It's become cliché to say 'our nation is divided.' But if it is a cliché, it's only because so many Americans like me have watched and been saddened by the growing state of division in our country over the years. In the past two decades, minor disagreements over policy have grown into outright distrust of our fellow Americans. So often nowadays, I hear people on both sides of the political spectrum saying things along the lines of: 'the other side wants us dead' or 'we aren't safe if the other side wins.'

I would never want to see our nation reach a state where half of our people – over 100 million people – no longer care if the other side lives. That would be a tragic eventuality for every American.

Thankfully...this isn't the case at all. I've spent years sitting and talking with self-identified liberals and conservatives alike, from professionals in workplaces to neighbors I run into in grocery stores. And I've had these same conversations with various people from all walks of life as I've traveled around our nation.

What these conversations have shown me is that by and large, most Americans – whether conservative or liberal – agree on more than they disagree on. Most of them want the same things: safe communities for our families and children, and a country where we can all find jobs and make an affordable living. They just disagree on the causes of the challenges our nation is faced with, and what to do about them.

So how did we get to a point of so much distrust, even hatred across the country – when most of the people we sit and talk with don't have views all that different from most of ours no matter what side of the political spectrum we come from?

Much of that distrust has come about because media commentators have taken sides in their commentaries and opinions more today than in the past, making it increasingly difficult for listeners and readers to discern truth from bias. In 1987, the Federal Communications Commission repealed the Fairness Doctrine, a law which since 1949 had required all public media to share the viewpoints expressed by both sides when sharing an opinion. This kept the public informed of what both sides really believed and why, regardless of which media outlet Americans happened to be listening to. It was considered the responsibility of public media to disseminate that truth completely and fairly; freedom of the press meant freedom to report truthfully and completely, not freedom to report prejudicially.

From the 1940s through the 1950s, '60s, '70s and '80s...this approach worked. And our country was less divided; even where we disagreed on what the best policies might be to address our nation's challenges, we knew that half the country wasn't our enemy.

Without media outlets being compelled to provide balanced information encompassing views from all sides, politicians have been given free rein to share any opinions they see fit to demonize the other side, or scare tactics to discourage people from voting for the other side – even if it means sharing information that is taken out of context, or outright false, without evidence. And the media outlets supporting their side, are quick to circulate it.

The result is that a large number of conservative Americans have been told – and genuinely believe – that all or most liberal Americans support communism, open borders, the banning of all firearms, and the defunding of law enforcement. Many conservatives also believe liberals don't share their commitment to protecting American jobs or traditional American families, and believe they want to encourage LGBTQ lifestyles among children in schools.

On the flipside, many liberal Americans have been told and believe just as assuredly that all or most conservative Americans support white supremacy and harbor a fear of nonwhite individuals joining our country, encourage racial and anti-LGBTQ violence, want women to have no rights or place in the workplace, and want the Christian religion to be the only legal faith in our country.

It's no wonder, then, that most Americans cannot understand how their neighbors could vote for the opposing party – or even believe they are a threat to the safety of our nation if they do.

I never worked in politics in any way until recently – I only began volunteering a couple of years ago when I saw how much more people actually agreed on than they disagreed on. I wanted to promote bringing people from both parties together, by letting them know how much of what they had been told about what people on the other side believe or want for our country was exaggerated or inaccurate.

I knew already from conversations with many, many friends and colleagues across the country as well as political volunteers who identify as liberal, that the assumptions about the liberal side weren't true: I've never met one American liberal who thinks communism was a successful idea, or wants to see it here; they just believe in tax-funded welfare programs to help the poorest Americans, and unions to protect employees from unrestricted employer abuses. I've never met one American liberal who thought our nation's borders should be open, with no regulation or screening; they just don't want to see immigrant families and children made to suffer for seeking asylum here after fleeing violent regions. I've never met one who didn't support American families as the backbone of society; they just want adults who are gay or transgender, or who choose to be childless to have that freedom respected without the government infringing on that right, or fear of harassment or violence for living with that freedom. And most I've

spoken with vehemently agree that LGBTQ lifestyles shouldn't be encouraged among children in public schools; they just want to ensure that our children are taught the fundamental principle of respecting the diversity of people that exist in our country without prejudice or hatred, in an age-appropriate manner.

American liberals recognize, like anyone, that communities need law enforcement personnel; they just want them properly trained and supervised to ensure that instances of targeting individuals based on their ethnicity without just cause do not continue to happen. Most don't oppose the right to keep a weapon for self-defense; they just feel there is no need for civilians to own military-grade weapons. They want to protect and expand American jobs, they just want to increasingly invest in the development of jobs in clean energy as well. And they want Christians to have the full right to practice their faith, as many liberals are themselves Christian; they only fear cases where select churches encourage prejudice or hatred toward LGBTQ individuals or members of other faiths, as they believe that these behaviors are contrary to Christian faith and encourage violence among our people.

In the same sense, of the conservative Americans I've spoken with – most have been firmly opposed to racism, and many are from nonwhite ethnicities themselves; they just don't want immigrants entering the country illegally and without proper screening for the safety of our communities. Many are also women, themselves in powerful positions in the workplace – who don't see American conservatism as opposing their rights or autonomy. Most of them don't oppose the right of individuals to be gay, or transgender; they just don't want them to encourage LGBTQ lifestyles among children in schools. Most of them don't want the Christian faith imposed on those who don't share it; many of them just fear being harassed or ostracized for simply being Christian.

I could go on and on pointing out the similarities in desires and beliefs. As you can see – most people on both sides want largely the same thing: to feel safe in our communities, to respect families, to be cautious and have a say in what our children are exposed to and learn at an early age, and to have the freedom to live and believe as we choose, without fear of overreach from the government or harassment or violence from members of our communities. I remember in Wyoming seeing corridors, the first in the nation, that were carefully constructed to protect native wildlife – largely by conservative groups. We may not agree on whether emissions from fossil fuels are driving climate change, but most of us can agree that we want to protect our natural environment, that we want clean air and water for us all.

To be sure, there are disagreements, but these are largely based on disagreements of what the best solutions are. This is where both sides' concerns and ideas deserve discussion and respect. There are extremists on both sides of course, but these are not the majorities, and should not be seen to speak for the majorities.

But as far as most Americans are concerned – liberals and conservatives have disagreements, but we are not enemies. And we do not wish harm to one another. So let's start by realizing, and working together on, the points we do agree with. Abraham Lincoln spoke aptly when he quoted the Biblical verse in relation to the state of our nation, stating that a house divided against itself cannot stand. The words from his first inaugural address remain relevant: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." My hope is that through increased communication, we can overcome misinformation and distrust to understand this and work together once more. Our nation will always be at its greatest, when we are not divided by mistrust or untruth – but when we work together to create a better society for each other, and for the generations that will come after us.