

OPINION

Time for talk

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We keep hearing about how polarized Americans have become, but polls reveal impressive agreement among a majority of us with regard to the major issues facing the country. What is surprising is that the majority opinion differs starkly from the policies propounded and pursued by the party and the candidate that the recent election put into office.

A Los Angeles Times poll found recently that many Americans (between 52 and 69 percent, depending on the issue) are skeptical about President George W.

Bush's proposed changes to Social Security, believe that the Iraq war has been

badly mismanaged and do not want the president's tax cuts made permanent if it

would worsen the deficit (which it would). Sixty percent say they believe that

improving the country's infrastructure would do more to stimulate the economy

than tax cuts. The Times reports that "an

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overwhelming majority of Americans

believes Washington is unlikely to make much progress on the country's key

problems."

And what of the "values" vote that we are told separates Americans on the issues of gay marriage and abortion rights? A Gallup poll dispels this notion, too. When asked to rate the importance of 18 issues facing the country, a majority placed these two "values" issues at the bottom (16 percent and 19 percent respectively). Even more striking, a CBS/New York Times poll finds that only 22 percent of respondents nationwide believe that abortion should be illegal.

How can there be such a disjunction between the positions a majority hold on the issues and the way a majority voted, three months after a presidential election that aroused more passion than any in memory, in which basic questions about the direction of the country were at stake?

I think the answer has something to do with a failure of public discourse.

The campaign aroused a lot of passion, but not a lot of discussion of the policies that would result if one or the other candidate was elected, nor of the effect these policies would have on citizens' lives.

What we had during the presidential campaign was not discourse but marketing. Thanks to the dominance of television advertising, the campaign was reduced to attempts to put forth a positive image of one candidate and a negative image of the other. The only forums for substantive discussion were

the three televised debates, though even these were not really discussions but snippets of condensed information, given the minutes-long allotment of time.

That Bush was elected even though everyone agreed that John Kerry had outshone him in all three debates is evidence that marketing triumphed over discourse.

Rather than addressing the issues, the Bush campaign repeated two simple mantras: Kerry is a flip-flopper and Bush will keep you safer in the face of blinding fear of terrorism (fear that their campaign rhetoric stoked).

One of Kerry's biggest weaknesses, most political experts agree, was that he talked about too many issues: He too should have chosen a single, simple way to characterize his opponent and repeat it (such as "Bush is in over his head," or "Bush is a liar").

But even with the campaign over, and the focus on capturing the White House no longer pressing, the shutdown of discussion continues. In a stunning rejection of the very notion of public debate, Bush recently declared in an interview with The Washington Post, "Well, we had an accountability moment, and that's called the 2004 election." With this, he sought to close the window for public debate on the actions taken by his administration and their effects.

Another discourse-stopping tide has rolled in since Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) confronted Secretary of State-to-be Condoleezza Rice during her confirmation hearings with Rice's own conflicting statements about the Iraq war

("I will not shrink from questioning a war that was not built on the truth")

and was accused by the nominee of "impugning my integrity." Boxer has since been denounced for her forthright debate even by those who, like her, oppose the war.

Perhaps most troubling is how little protest we hear against this stifling of argument - from Democrats, from the press or from the person on the street.

The curtailing of discourse is taken for granted - as it was during the presidential campaign - as the way we do business. Even though Rice was approved last week by the Senate with more "no" votes than any Secretary of State since World War II (a sign that dissent is not entirely dead), the confirmation hearings were conducted with a sense of resignation that the nominees would be approved no matter what.

What happened to the passion that we saw during the presidential campaign?

People I know who had never contributed to a political campaign did, and those who had contributed gave more than ever before; people who had never actively participated before became involved by leafleting, canvassing, registering voters, making telephone calls and even traveling to swing states.

The activity seemed most intense among Kerry supporters, and it was driven, I think, by the seriousness of the policies they objected to, policies that were disliked even by many of those who voted for Bush (and whose interest in

the campaign was aroused mostly by fear of terrorism): the disastrous war, the gigantic deficit, the increasing isolation of the United States in the international community. And many who gave in so many ways to Kerry's campaign were still outraged that the president had been placed in office not by a majority vote but by a Supreme Court decision. They were energized by the opportunity to do something to influence the political process, to change what they believed was wrong.

The lack of passion that we see now results, at least in part, from a sense that there is nothing we can do to change things we strongly object to. There is a sense that we can't influence the working of government or even public discourse. The congressional hearings, the talk-radio programs and the television talk shows will grind on, with or without us.

We'd see instant improvement if our laws were brought in line with those of France, Britain and Denmark, where paid political advertising is prohibited and air time is provided free. (The free slots run 5 to 10 minutes, rather than the 30 to 60 seconds of our high-priced ads.) This kind of programming would encourage more serious discussion and also go a long way toward removing the corrupting influence of campaign contributions, and the diversion of candidates' attention as they are forced to become nonstop fundraisers. But since that is unlikely to happen, we have to look elsewhere. I suggest

that we turn our attention to private discourse, our day-to-day conversations.

Here is where we could recapture some of the passion that was so much in evidence during the campaign.

In much of the world, discussing - even arguing about - politics is a popular pastime. For most Americans, talking about politics is considered inappropriate, even unseemly, especially if the people you're talking to disagree with you. I saw this when I was having lunch with my father and two other residents at a senior living facility to which he had recently moved. My father, who is European-born, asked in frustration, "Doesn't anyone talk politics here?" The woman sitting with us set her lips and sealed her expression. "I don't talk politics," she announced. It's part of the tradition among many Americans of never telling anyone which choice you made inside the voting booth.

When American college students go to study in Germany, according to a colleague who helps students prepare for semesters abroad, they are taken aback when their German counterparts try to engage them in heated political arguments by challenging American foreign policy. The Americans clam up, convinced that the German students are belligerent and rude, while the Germans conclude that the Americans are apathetic and uninformed.

Our reluctance to risk conflict in conversation means that we aren't forced

to articulate, and therefore examine, the logical underpinnings of our positions, and we rarely get the chance to engage in give-and-take with those who hold views different from our own. Even worse, when young people don't hear adults arguing politics, it reinforces their impression that politics has no relevance to their lives. Surely this plays a role in the astonishingly low voter turnout among young Americans.

If we could reframe our attitudes toward talking politics and bring the subject back into our conversations, people might be reminded that elections can influence policies that affect their lives.

Assumptions about the display of opposition vary widely from culture to culture. Many cultures, such as the Japanese, avoid even mild forms of open disagreement, but there are many others, including Mediterranean, East European and African cultures, that value dynamic opposition as a form of sociability and a show of willingness to engage with others. Americans with roots in those cultures often enjoy a good argument; the rest of us can benefit from their example.

I don't see much hope for improvement in our public discourse, given the dominance of television which is, after all, an entertainment medium. But our private conversations could provide an alternative source of political engagement. We'd all be forced to educate ourselves about policy in order to

win more arguments. The conversations could stir our passions, motivate young people, and result in citizens voting for the candidates whose policies actually are in line with their own views on the issues that will have impact on their daily lives.

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