



Why Americans Must Resist Delegitimizing Partisan Combat

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Party polarization has overrun the nation, warping the operation of U.S. political institutions and shaping Americans' ways of thinking about public issues and one another. Polarization has led people to think in tribal terms and look for ways to marginalize nonconforming members who depart from stark contrasts with opponents. This way of thinking – what I call the “delegitimizing mindset” – is corrosive in ways that are not reducible to government gridlock or the unwillingness of political groups to compromise, because it weakens democracy as a system grounded in regulated party rivalry between those who temporarily hold authority and their legitimate opposition. When partisans stop “agreeing to disagree,” they start defining the world in contrasting ways and adopting automatically combative stances toward one another. Everything becomes part of partisan combat in ways that corrode everyday life and social relations outside of political institutions.

The Delegitimizing Mindset

The delegitimizing mindset is a psychological and cognitive attribute of individuals inculcated by a group or party and maintained by marginalizing or casting out nonconforming members. This coercive mindset has taken hold in many periods and settings, but in the United States today, the two major political parties are not equally implicated in such efforts to demonize opponents and dissenters. Delegitimizing efforts are currently prevalent in a great deal of Republican rhetoric and conduct, practiced by many (though not all) GOP officials and by many citizen supporters of the Republican Party.

Among Republicans the warring permanent campaign that inflects party politics today is waged in ways and for reasons that depart from democratic electoral politics as usual. Republicans often go well beyond the usual kinds of partisan arguments that the opposition is mistaken or subscribes to a flawed understanding of the public interest. Delegitimizing claims involve more than mistrust of opposition motives – and involve attempts to do much more than win elections. Instead, Republicans inspired by the sense that their opponents are not fully legitimate Americans seek to disenfranchise citizens who might vote for their opponents. And if their opponents do win elections, Republicans of this mindset try to keep them from governing and effectively carrying out the functions of their offices. Trumped up investigations, refusals to confirm executive nominations for key offices or court appointments, impeaching officials, and making threats against officials carrying out their duties – all are tactics used by those who question the very legitimacy of their opponents and want to render them impotent public servants. The aim is to intimidate, degrade, and demean the opposition, while loudly denying that the opposition is legitimate.

Consider the extreme rhetoric Republicans have used about President Barack Obama. Democratic legitimacy often appeals to the Constitution; thus President Obama is denounced as a “lawless president” whose administration constitutes an “eight-year constitutional crisis.” More sweepingly, Republicans charge that President Obama and Democrats are subverting American values and altering the identity of the nation –

supposedly by undercutting America as a Christian nation or “mongrelizing” a white nation, or empowering “takers” rather than “makers.” Denounced as a closet Muslim, President Obama has been accused of ceding American rights to outsiders, breaching U.S. sovereignty in favor of a “new world order,” even betraying national interests by catering to terrorists. In the delegitimizing mindset, particular racial or ethnic or social groups can be singled out as the cause of the nation’s problems – with the partisan opposition presented as agents of that treacherous, alien out-group. Rhetoric like this is ubiquitous on the right in U.S. politics today.

Invoking Conspiracies and Delegitimizing Knowledge-Producing Institutions

Partisans with a delegitimizing mindset regularly invoke dark conspiracies. Political opponents are accused of using deceptive means to deprive Americans of their basic liberties – for example, by promoting Islamic law in the United States or fatally weakening national defenses. As Republican presidential contender Senator Marco Rubio put it darkly: “Let’s dispel with this fiction that Barack Obama doesn’t know what he’s doing. He knows exactly what he’s doing.”

Conspiracy mongering is, of course, not new in U.S. political culture. Today, however, the charge is not leveled against some set of subversive outliers (such as Communists, anarchists, black militants, or anti-war demonstrators) but against a major political party. And the accusers are leaders and supporters of the other major party. Matters can go to outlandish extremes, as they did in the summer of 2015 when Texas GOP officials deployed the State Guard when extremists claimed that the U.S. Army was plotting to invade and occupy the state. Without encouragement from politicians and officeholders, such conspiracy theories would remain on the fringe, their impact limited.

Another delegitimizing technique is to question the honesty of fundamental data from government agencies like the Congressional Budget Office or the National Institutes of Health, while also looking to undermine claims from scientists and university experts – such as scientific findings about climate change. Such attacks are corrosive of democratic decision-making – because democratic governance is undermined when information-based decision-making is deficient and outcomes are not self-correcting. If there are no facts or findings to be respected as a basis for discussion, then the path is clear to justifying authoritarianism or pushing populist policies based merely on unenlightened common sense. The result is an even more pernicious form of division – epistemic polarization, in which what people claim to know about the world is colored by party stances. When knowledge is no longer shared, democratic decision-making becomes impossible.

Speaking Truth to Delegitimizers

Countering the corrosive effects of the delegitimizing mindset is the responsibility of all citizens, not just of Democrats, or political leaders, or media outlets. In all settings, Americans who care about preserving opportunities to disagree agreeably must be ready to call out these practices and label them as undemocratic, alerting everyone to the need to fight this uniquely damaging aspect of partisan polarization.

Research for this brief is drawn from the author’s unpublished work in progress.