

Manoj Mohanan:

Hello and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Manoj Mohanan. I'm the interim dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy here at Duke University. This fall, we focused our podcast conversations on the health of democracy in America. Today we are diving into an issue that is central to democratic society, civil discourse. It's no secret that our ability to engage in meaningful conversations across political, cultural and ideological divides feels more strained than ever. But my guest today has dedicated his career to improving just that. Abdullah Antepli is a public policy faculty member at Duke and the director of POLIS, the Center for Politics at Sanford School.

He's also a nationally recognized expert on civil discourse. In fact, he's actually teaching a course here at our school on this topic. He's teaching students the skills they need to navigate these tough conversations. And this year through a special series called Bridging the Divide, Abdullah and his team at POLIS are creating public forums for dialogue between people with very opposing views. Just last week, they finished a session in DC with Senator Maggie Hassan, a Democrat from New Hampshire, and former North Carolina Senator Richard Burr, a Republican. Abdullah, thank you so much for joining me today.

Abdullah Antepli:

Glad to be here.

Manoj Mohanan:

Okay, so let's start with the basics. What is civil discourse and why is it so crucial in our society today?

Abdullah Antepli:

Thank you. It is crucial, but before I give my own version of what it is, I want to say what it is not. There are two misconception and myths that I try to debunk about civil discourse. The invitation to civil discourse is in no way should be understood or construed as anti-difference, because what we don't want is to get a categorical sort of hostility towards difference. Difference is good. Difference is important, essential for any democracies to function. So any kind of division, partisanship, polarization, essentially, in my mind, at least in my book, it's not a bad thing. It is only bad when it becomes toxic, when it becomes destructive, when it becomes source of bigotry, violence, exclusion, and unwelcome. So this invitation to civil discourse or however you understand and implement it should not be an anti-difference.

If your understanding of a solution to our political, social, ideological problem is if we are all the same, if the entire America will be red or blue, this is at best delusion. At worst, history of humanity is full of stories. Any attempt to homogenize immune societies, any failure in understanding innate human diversity, not understanding that the world runs through different people, different skills, different set of ideas, any failure to appreciate the value, essential value of difference always ends with disaster. The second, also most important myth and misunderstanding about civil discourse is invitation to civil discourse, by all means, not invitation to flatten our differences, flatten our moral convictions. You are not inviting people to just focus on what we share in common.

Not to discuss what divides us, what polarizes us, or whenever we do civil discourse, to check out all those differences and only speak about fluffy, kumbaya stuff. That also defeats the whole purpose. If anything, civil discourse is at its best when it's done with people who have strong ideas, who have strong disagreements, who have commitments to particular strategies or moral commitments, and somehow find out a way if it is done well to air discuss these differences in constructive helpful ways. That's what civil discourse is. Civil discourse is incredibly essential because when societies fail or lose

their ability to engage across difference constructively, their social cohesion, their ability to run complex institutions, their ability to form coalitions or promote compromise around what is a public good deteriorates and the inevitable outcome of these deteriorations is always violence, always death and destruction.

If you look at any failed and deteriorated civilizations of the past, before they are threatened by their external enemies, often their deterioration and decline begins internally within their ability to understand, celebrate their internal diversity. And the external enemies usually enters through the doors that these internal weaknesses, internal inability to discuss their differences constructively, they enter through these open doors. And we are in one of those moments, Americans, and this is a global problem, we are not unique at all. The levels of toxic, destructive, unhelpful, polarization, ideological, political, and every possible difference in American society, it divides us and polarizes in ways that is no longer constructive, that is no longer leaning on our diversity as a strength. It further polarizes us. It reached two levels. If you look at our colleagues in the Duke Polarization Lab and others who are studying this, they say in some parts of America, in some policy topics like abortion, same-sex marriage, freedom of speech, if you look at these topics, the levels of polarization has reached an 1850s level, and we know what happened in 1860.

So it is untenable and unmanageable level. That's why if I may as a last point, Duke University and all universities, I think it is within our essential ethical, moral responsibility. What is a higher education? Our job is to gain the trust of the societies that we are in to receive their future leaders and prepare them for the future. Therefore, it is an innate responsibility for any higher educational institution to capture these pressing questions, living questions, difficult questions of the society and model and exemplify and present working models, different solutions, sources of inspiration. So if Americans are struggling to have civil discourse in the way that I described, have difficult conversations, have constructive disagreements, it is very much within our moral responsibility. We have to model and exemplify what those difficult conversations across radical differences would look like.

Manoj Mohanan:

That's fantastic, Abdullah, and it makes me think about three things from what you just told us. One about the differences and how these differences are getting really wide, the strategies to deal with the difference, and then also talking about modeling good behavior in dealing with these differences. So let me go through each of these in turn, starting with the first one. In many ways, as you just told us about what happened all the way until 1850s and 1860. If these differences are so wide, what gives you the optimism that we can still continue to have dialogue, meaningful conversations about things that we disagree so heavily about, and how can we bridge this gap?

Abdullah Antepli:

What gives me a lot of hope is our relative success. I am not a complete Pollyanna about American history or American democracy, but you and I grew up in different parts of the world. We have seen other ways of governance. We struggle in our own birth homelands, how people struggle with these questions. America has a lot of problem, but compared to other emerging democracies, America is still one of the most promising and successful, multicultural, multilingual, multi-religious society. And it's one of the most successful attempt to create diverse set of communities with shared values and overarching citizenship and identity. And if you look at our ups and downs in the last 250 years, Americans came a long way in their ability to understand difference and then turn them into a source of celebration and strength as much as possible.

We just have to provide those educational growth to our society. When we understand difference is our difference in disagreement between red and blue, liberal and conservative, pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian, pro-choice and pro-life. Are these differences, strategy differences? Are these policy differences or ethical, moral differences? Do I disagree with you because you completely shared a disconnected and opposing and contradictory set of morals and values? Or we have more or less the same set of values, but we have a different strategy, different way, different paths to achieve that moral outcome? Or even if we share moral differences, is it because we have incredibly opposing and mutually exclusive set of moral values?

Or we share the same set of values, but because of who we are, our background, our multiple identities, our lived experiences, we rank and emphasize these moral values differences for you because of who you are, justice is the most important thing. That's your number one value, cardinal value. For me, forgiveness is. Now, these are not mutually exclusive, but sometimes it leads to strategies, policies in a different way. And I have seen this over and over, even in the most contentious, like the class that you mentioned at the introduction, I bring pro-life and pro-choice people together. And most often than not, they've never talked to one another. They assume their differences are completely disconnected morally, therefore they feel very strongly. But when you actually drill down and provide that safe space, ethics and morality thrives in complexity and it suffocates itself in the simplicity, essentialism, that black and white stuff.

I am hopeful because I've seen it with my students, with the people that I work in Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the Republicans and Democrats, all the number of programs that we are running. When you provide that opportunity for people to where is your disagreement is coming from? Why do I disagree and in what way? And I have to emphasize, again, connecting to my first two points. Not that these disagreements disappear, but if you understand where your opponent, your intellectual opponent or even your enemy is coming from, it creates a space in your heart and mind. And your ability to air that disagreement comes from a place of knowledge, appreciation, some sort of an understanding. And it never leads to violence. It never leads to and bigotry. That's why I've seen it work. That's why I'm hopeful.

Manoj Mohanan:

So if I can build from that point, it sounds like you're telling us the shared values and the focus on the shared values in the classroom setting for the civil discourse class is really what sets the stage for having these conversations. So can you tell us a little bit more about what students learn in terms of strategies to have these conversations in the classroom?

Abdullah Antepi:

Yeah. First of all, for their ability to unpack this difference, whether the disagreement and difference between you and me is a political difference or a moral difference is a huge achievement for a lot of students. Because for so many of them, if they don't have a lot of experience, they switch for a policy disagreement or a strategy disagreement so quickly into a moral disagreement, very quickly. That's when things start going in the wrong direction. So for their ability to slow down and first of all make the basic distinction, "Am I disagreeing with you on the base of policy and strategy or on the base of ethics and morality, and even if it's an ethical, moral disagreement in what level, in what ranking and in what order?" It really creates one of those educational growth to our students on all fronts.

It is no secret that majority of our students are liberal and progressive. It is no secret that many of them, they come from places where they don't have a lot of opportunities to understand more center right, center conservative. I'm not making any bogus generalization. This is based on polls and all these years

of teaching. So once you provide helpful windows, educational opportunities for them to make sense of other 50% of America that they have never had a chance and show their humanity and show some of their legitimate grievances and disagreements. Why they think differently and in what way their difference in thinking is not because they're evil or immoral, but it's coming from a different set of life experiences or different ethical moral convictions. It brings that level of appreciation to that difference. So in a way, it creates and further appetite and intellectual inquiry for them.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah, this must be such a fascinating class for students to sit in and learn about how to separate out the assumptions we make about political positions and the moral values that often get interchangeably used in these discussions. So I'm envious, frankly, of the students in your class and one of these days I'm going to sit in myself.

Abdullah Antepli:

If I may say one thing, I only told you half of the puzzle. To me, the real magic, real success is not what you learn about the other, how much appreciation you develop about the politically, ideologically, ethically, morally, religiously, ethnically, different person. But the real magic is when you engage with difference in that level of constructive, helpful way. At some point that crossing the line, either ideologically partisan and otherwise, not only you learn a lot about the other people, but at some point that experience becomes a mirror. You see yourself in that attempt, that effort to understand other people. You become more aware of who you are, you become better in your own camp.

You question and interrogate your own ideas that is often formed by naive social media posts and things like that. I mean, many times pro-life and pro-choice people realize, "I need to go back and study my own camp. I just don't know." Understandably, especially at a college age, people sort of lick their finger and look at which direction the wind is blowing and they form ethical, moral conclusions based on what's popular, what's getting more attention in social media. They haven't really thought about what this means to sign up to this particular camp or this particular label or this particular identity. To me, the real magic is not what you learn about the people that you disagree or you are different from, but what you learn about yourself.

Manoj Mohanan:

Fascinating. So going back to the third point, which was really about modeling such behavior and modeling examples of celebrating the difference and understanding the differences and then Bridging the Divide. So let's go back to the Bridging the Divide series that POLIS is running. What a fascinating initiative. So tell us a little bit about what the inspiration behind this series is and what do you hope to achieve with these public dialogues?

Abdullah Antepli:

I am extremely alarmed but not pessimistic and in despair, the level of partisan, ideological and political polarization in our country. And as I said over and over, I'm a firm believer that a little bit of decency and opportunities that creates a safe space for people to engage, even among people who have radical disagreements is an educational responsibility that we need to do. And in this regard, we started here at POLIS to bring more voices and experiences and perspectives that is not readily available on our campus. That tends to be more conservative, more republican, a little bit center-right individuals and policies.

Manoj Mohanan:

So you mean the voices that we don't typically hear from is these ones?

Abdullah Antepli:

Yes. Yes. And by all means, this is not creating an obligation to like what we see or endorse or take sides. That's not the point. The point is, can I understand you better and can we have this disagreement a little bit more constructively. And analyze and interrogate whether our differences are really moral disagreements to a point that I need to completely declare you as morally deviant, morally unacceptable people. Or even if our disagreements are not bridgeable, we think very, very differently on these political and policy issues, on immigration, on abortion, despite these disconnect and unbridgeable divide, are there some cardinal values? Are there my higher values that might connect us?

Can we create overarching connecting tissues, our commitment to democracy, our commitment to diversity and pluralism in our society, our commitment to lift up people from poverty and for under-village? I think there are so many of them, but because we don't engage, because our social media posts are locking us up literally into our small eco-champs. We don't get these opportunities. So through these Bridging the Divide sessions, we try to create formal, informal, curricular, extracurricular and co-curricular opportunities for our students to have these kind of exposures. Again, with no obligation to like or agree. Bringing people into an agreement is not my point. My point is even further complexify and problematize what they think of others and more importantly what they think of themselves.

Manoj Mohanan:

Fascinating. So the event we had last week where the two senators, Senator Maggie Hassan from New Hampshire and our former senator Richard Burr, were talking about health policy. So do you think those conversations helped us model such behavior, and do you think these conversations in the coming years or coming months will help us provide a template for future cross-partisan dialogues? And what are your hopes from the series going forward?

Abdullah Antepli:

I am extremely encouraged with the outcomes of these Bridging the Divide series with Senator Burr, Senator Hassan, and other activities, long list of activities. I encourage the people who are listening to us to go to our POLIS website and look at the long range of activities that we are doing. I think one of the greatest success is when you have these kind of meaningful conversations, people realize that every individual is bigger than their vote, bigger than their label, bigger than what catches the eye.

Understanding humanity with its bundle of labels and it's complexity. Remember, I don't know, that's how I felt with multiple questions that our students and our alumni are asking five minutes before the conversation, they judge a Democratic senator and Republican Senator Trump endorsing Republican senator in one way or another. But once they open up and invite you to their lives and their complexities, oh, these people are much bigger. It is very unjust and unfair to judge somebody based on one particular affiliation, one particular label or one particular vote.

That in itself is I think educational victory that I would celebrate. It's also allowing and enabling our students, especially when it comes to policy. As I understand, I'm a theologian, I'm a clergy, I'm a born-again public policy enthusiast. So I may sound a little bit more enthusiastic than most people. As I understand it, public policy is the art of compromise, art of contraction because there are higher values, because there are higher, more pressing issues are involved. These conversations showed these people who can be different enough, who otherwise would incredibly disagree on other issues, on abortion or immigration, but they found one particular topic of healthcare. And they found an overlap and intersection of interest where they can create a piece of legislation that will help their people and that's

what they elected for. So what I saw in addition to everything I said is that I think those two senators gave us an opportunity if and when and how public policy works if the art of compromise is alive and thriving.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yes. And I was there as well as one of the things that I took away from that conversation as well was not just the compromise and the shared values that you earlier talked about and their shared policy priorities, but then their ability to then talk to their respective constituencies about why it's important to them. So here was an example of a card-carrying Republican senator and a card-carrying Democratic senator, both of whom were interested in the same policy reforms, but were able to reach out to their constituencies and talk about why it's important to them. And this is the shared value that you were alerting us to earlier.

Abdullah Antepli:

Absolutely. And another aspect is I think both Senator Maggie Hassan and Senator Richard Burr, which I'm truly grateful, they also show that being right is not the most important thing, especially in the area and space of public leadership, public policy being wise is more important. And they taught us practical wisdom. That's what you want. They showed us how did they compromise and how did they communicate that compromises to their own people, in what stages? And if they would've only stick with what is right, what is just, and whether or not they're right or wrong, that wasn't their concern. Their concern was there is a public good and what is the wise way, not just the right way or my way to get there. They were teaching as Greek philosophers say, teach us practical wisdom that is often missing in this essentialist, reductionist black and white political conversations.

Manoj Mohanan:

Thank you. We are almost out of time. So let me ask you one last question for our colleagues, our audiences who are listening in today. If they want to have a productive conversation with friends, neighbors, colleagues, the holiday season's coming up, who hold opposing values and opposing views, what's one piece of advice you would give them?

Abdullah Antepli:

Thank you. I never see myself in a position of advice at all, but I would like to share with you what worked in my personal and professional life. Before you judge and jump into any conclusion, before you box and pigeon hole anybody, make sure you spend time to understand where they're coming from with no obligation to agree with them, endorse their ideas or legitimize whatever you think. In my early education, I've done a lot of debate and one of the criteria for the debate was if I'm going to debate with Manoj Mohanan, I needed to take a test on the ideas of Manoj and I had to score C plus B minus. See that if I'm actually worthy and deserving of debating with you, even though it was in the context of scriptural and religious teaching, I generalized that as a principle.

If I really agree and disapprove and disagree, anybody, individual or collectively, I feel I'm ethically, morally required to take a test of their ideas to see if I can actually understand. And there are people who I studied who scored A plus of their ideas and I ended up declaring them as morally deviant people. I find their ideas appalling, but often if you do that study, that's a very tiny minority within in every society. If you take time to understand where these people are coming from, usually they're a lot more complex. There are a lot more reasons, justifiable, unjustifiable, even if it's unjustifiable, it is explanatory because of who they are, what kind of experiences they had. If you take time to study them.

So one advice if I can give it to myself and everybody, especially if you have strong feelings, if you have strong disagreements, if you feel incredibly troubled by how somebody can think so differently before you judge their decision or their ideas or where they stand on any given issue, study them, study their ideas, try to see the world through their eyes. So instead of quickly judging people as appalling, as troubling as their ideas would be, give it a chance and ask, "Why is this important to you? Why do you feel so strongly about this?" Or what frame of reference you have in understanding with a non-judgmental attitude. And see if some of the responses will slow you down in your judgment. It makes a difference.

Manoj Mohanan:

Thank you so much, Abdullah. Thank you for being here and sharing your insights.

Abdullah Antepli:

Glad to be here. Thank you for the opportunity.

Manoj Mohanan:

Professor Abdullah Antepli is a faculty member here at the Sanford School of Public Policy, and he's also the director of POLIS, the Center for Politics. You can learn more about our series, Bridging the Divide in our show notes. And if this conversation has interested you, Abdullah was also a guest on this series, the Policy 360 podcast previously, that conversation was also about civil discourse. Back then, Abdullah joined us with his friend Ray Starling and the two men could not be more different. Ray grew up on a hog and tobacco farm in rural North Carolina and leans right. Abdullah grew up in poverty in Turkey and leans left. They met and became friends as part of an initiative to get civic business and political leaders with differing political views to discuss important issues in the state of North Carolina. We'll have a link to that conversation in our show notes, but today, that's all the time we have, and I'll be back soon with more conversations about politics, policies, ideas, and challenges shaping our democracy. I'm Manoj Mohanan, thank you for joining us.