Viewpoint
A Path Toward Depolarization
By Angela Bradbery & Jane Johnston
A Path Toward Depolarization

The emerging discipline of public interest communications offers solutions to our deeply polarized and divided world.

BY ANGELA BRADBERY & JANE JOHNSTON

Headlines in the United States tell of bitter political polarization. Take gun control, for instance. Mass shootings have become all too common, followed by news stories that imply that reform efforts are doomed. “As Mass Shootings Continue, Gridlock on Guns Returns to Washington,” laments a January 24, 2023, headline from The New York Times after two shootings in California.

But the truth is more complex than the headlines suggest. Although the gun-safety movement has faced serious setbacks, it has also seen gains. Poll after poll shows that Americans overwhelmingly want to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people, and in some states, legislators from both sides of the aisle have responded. In June 2022 passed modest gun-safety reforms as well, with more than two dozen Republicans voting for them.

“For years, the gun lobby has spread the myth that we face a binary choice: guns everywhere, or no guns at all. That’s not true,” says Gun Owners for Safety, a coalition launched by former US Rep. Gabby Giffords, who survived an assassination attempt in 2011 by a gunman. “Patriots of every stripe can agree that the Second Amendment goes hand-in-hand with commonsense measures like universal background checks. That’s what we’re about—bringing together unlikely allies to speak out for safety and responsibility.”

As academics developing the field of public interest communications, we understand the wisdom of an approach that speaks to commonalities instead of differences. We live on opposite sides of the globe and have divergent definitions of public interest communications. But we share several common principles—and we believe these commonalities are critical to addressing the dangerous, often entrenched, political and social polarization that has developed in the United States and elsewhere around the world.

THREE FUNDAMENTALS

Public interest communications is an emerging academic discipline that seeks to use communications to address complex social issues. At the University of Florida, where Angela teaches, we define it as the use of research-based strategic communications to mobilize people to effect positive social change—usually to attain a specific goal or outcome. At the University of Queensland, where Jane teaches, it’s about prioritizing democratic processes (such as consultation and listening) and enabling reasoned public debate. As such, it’s as much about process as outcome or solution.

Despite such divergence, we share three commitments. First, we favor moving away from thinking in binaries. Strict divisions of good and bad, right and wrong, do not apply to our complex social and political world. As Giffords’ group says, guns are not about all or nothing. Individuals are complex and do not fit into the boxes we usually assign to them. Rather, they fall within a spectrum of progressive-conservative thinking, depending on the issue. George Lakoff, renowned cognitive linguist and analyst of political discourse, calls this “biconceptualism,” meaning that people may harbor both progressive and conservative worldviews. Which viewpoint they apply depends on the situation and issue.

Others see this shift away from binaries as evidence of social progress. Futurist Bob Johansen, for example, calls this new way of conceiving the world “full-spectrum thinking.” Because we increasingly move across roles in society and have multiple identities in our lives, binaries become counterproductive. We are forced to move beyond binary thinking and see things in terms of scale and nuance. This fluid approach to modern life accepts that difference is not as stark as it might once have appeared to be.

Second, we promote finding shared values. People who may disagree on issues can often still find shared values from which they may find agreement. In the wake of a horrific string of mass shootings in the United States, news stories highlighted the fact that a majority of gun owners support certain gun-safety measures. Pro-reform messages focus on the shared value of safety, and increasingly we see calls for treating guns as we do cars—potentially lethal equipment that can be regulated to minimize harm.

In Australia, a popular turn toward values of individual freedom, equality, and inclusiveness has seen some social justice issues such as same-sex marriage and voluntary assisted dying (VAD) legalized in recent years. Same-sex marriage was affirmed nationally in 2017 following a national postal vote, with many seeing the change to marriage legislation as a symbolic victory for gender equality more broadly. Likewise, VAD was introduced in the state of Victoria in 2019, with each
All societies struggle to varying degrees with political division. Yet research shows that often what we believe about “the other side” is inaccurate, as is what we think the other side believes about us. If we talk to one another directly, we find that we have much more in common than we thought.