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Destroying the Divide

 “Nothing is black and white” - these are words we’ve been told to live by, but a sentiment that seems lost in modern political discourse. Our schools teach us how to think critically - how to discover bias in text, how to figure out if a source is trustworthy, and how to consider all sides of an argument. Despite this, American politics have become radicalized. Presidential debates have turned into shouting matches, muckraking is a way of life, and global politics are more polarized than ever before. This pervasive lack of critical thinking has led to a troubling regression in social progress: school districts across the United States collectively banned 2,500 books from 2021 to 2022, the overturning of Roe v. Wade in 2022 stripped women of their rights, and 350 bills against life-saving transgender healthcare were introduced since the beginning of 2023 (Friedman and Johnson; Zoledziowski). As a teenager staring down my future, it’s difficult not to be terrified by this situation. However, there is hope. I have realized that the victims of our current political system hold the power to change it.

Division is at the core of our problems. Cultural and regional divides have existed for as long as written history, from the Greco-Persian wars in 500 BC to the modern-day divide between India and Pakistan. This type of division has always been a source of widespread conflict, but modern technology has made it much more pressing. The information highway that is the Internet means harmful dissemination of differing perspectives can be instant: zealous individuals can hold several insult-filled political arguments at the same time, politicians can run wide-reaching smear campaigns, and foreign entities can silently fund political campaigns to change the course of a nation’s history. Media has been similarly corrupted, with profit driven by number of clicks incentivizing reporting on news with high shock value and little substance. If a politician or media outlet wants to be successful, they are forced to take part in these toxic practices, furthering social division.

 Fortunately, the pervasiveness of the internet can go both ways. Social media and the internet have been instrumental in organizing positive social movements. In the two weeks after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the term “#BlackLivesMatter” was used 47.8 million times on twitter; following this, the Minnesota Supreme Court brought justice to Derek Chauvin, the police officer who murdered George Floyd, with a second-degree murder conviction (Monica). The #MeToo movement saw similar results, with thousands of women who have faced sexual assault bringing the issue to light in a collective act of courage that would not have been seen without the internet. Common people have always held the power to come together and tackle issues in our society, but with the internet we finally have the organizational ability to see this become a reality. By taking part in grassroots movements like these, the fight against political corruption feels not only possible, but inevitable: corrupt politicians have money, but they cannot match the power of a united and determined population.

The first step an individual can take toward improving our politics is simply acting with compassion. This part isn’t difficult when we recognize that our day-to-day interactions, even those involving politics, are usually far from negative. A 2022 CBS news poll on a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults resulted in 66% of people stating that political conversations with people with different political views are usually pleasant or neutral. It’s easy to become blinded by the barrage of news designed to hook people in with outrage; taking a step back and grounding yourself in your local community provides a much-needed shift in perspective. It’s our responsibility to act with compassion – whether you start a non-profit or simply make it a habit to compliment your co-workers more often, we will build bridges across political divides and reduce the animosity in our culture. Being involved in politics also means seeking our own education: our world is constantly changing, and it’s our duty to read beyond headlines, seek diverse perspectives, and verify information before we share it with others. In a world where misinformation and discord spreads like wildfire, being a responsible and informed citizen is the key to an equitable future.

The state of modern politics is daunting, but I have high hopes knowing that the pieces are all there for the oppressed to rise and achieve the justice they deserve. What comes next will be up to whether people will take initiative and become involved in their political system. A bewildering 51.4% of United States citizens aged 18 to 24 voted in the latest election, with the most common reason to not vote being that “they were not interested in the election” (US Census Bureau). This apathy is unacceptable. We cannot afford to be complacent when our rights, communities, and planet itself are all on the line. The marginalized have always been the ones to pave the way forward, but they cannot do it alone. We have made our voices heard in the past, and we must do it again to take responsibility for our future.

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