

## Real and Perceived Self-Interests Distort Perceptions of the Truth

The number of books, articles, and essays that have been written attempting to describe and understand the current divisions in American public life must number in the tens of thousands. I have yet to read anything that fully satisfies, however. And I'm unpersuaded that any well-intentioned effort at bi-partisanship or political dialogue is likely to achieve a more united citizenry.

One thing seems abundantly clear. Our deep societal divide has a great deal to do with what we perceive to be the truth. Unfortunately, what people believe to be the truth is not determined solely by evidence, or facts, or logic, or reason. People tend to believe what they want to believe. They tend to want to believe what they perceive to be in their self-interest. They tend to regard their self-interest in ways that justify or legitimate their way of life, the choices and investments they have made, the judgments they have expressed, the loyalties they have forged, and various other characteristics that make them who they are.

So we disagree about global climate change, about the pandemic and vaccinations, about abortion, about the historical roles and current legacy of genocide and racism in America, about the results of the recent Presidential election, about the events surrounding and including the events at the Capitol Building on January 6, 2022, and a whole lot more.

In a democratic society, it has long been considered virtuous to agree to disagree about important matters. But with many of the issues facing us today, that is a luxury we can hardly afford.

The planet does not care what we believe about climate change. It is happening now, and will get worse. The best we can do is understand what is happening and why, and do everything possible to mitigate its effects.

The coronavirus does not care what we believe. The virus can obviously kill. We need to decide and act according to our best judgments regarding the value of human life and how best to protect it.

Abortion probably cannot (nor should it) ever be an entirely private matter. Pregnancies don't just happen. And fetuses, though not persons by any reasonable stretch of law or language, are nascent human lives, not simply bodily tissue.

Genocide and racism have deeply scarred American history. The evidence is incontrovertible. Those who disagree, or now believe that's all in the past, are in denial about major empirical realities of contemporary American life.

Joe Biden beat Donald Trump in an election that was about as fair and free as any in history. No evidence exists to the contrary.

The events of January 6 did not constitute "legitimate political discourse," despite the unanimous vote of the Republican National Committee on February 4. Understand, however, that someone

who truly believes the Presidential election was stolen by Biden and the Democrats could feel justified in trying to reverse that outcome, even by violent means. The Declaration of Independence calls for revolt against an unjust tyrant. But in this case calling an insurrection “legitimate political discourse” was a disingenuous distraction from the real issue, namely the undocumented, patently false belief that the former President was illegally unseated by a fraudulent election.

Again, the great divide in our society closely parallels what is perceived to be the truth. Even truly legitimate political discourse based on facts, evidence, logic, and reason has proven insufficient to overcome our differing perceptions of reality. We must also confront and address the enormous and wide-ranging empirical differences in our real and perceived self-interests if we are to make much headway toward the realization of our common good.

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