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As globalization makes the world smaller, we seem to rub up against people with whom we disagree all the more frequently. Towns that were once relatively homogeneous now contain people of multiple backgrounds, persuasions, and views. Yet oddly, as the world becomes more heterogeneous, many of us find ourselves in a cocoon of like-minded folk. We’ve become proficient at assessing at a glance what a stranger thinks. We’re quick to draw a picture, perhaps too quick. With high probability we can surmise—from someone’s clothes, from where she buys her groceries, from the kind of car she drives, and even the kind of garden she plants—what her values are and for whom she voted in the last election. Or, better, we’ll just check out the stickers on her car bumper. If the picture we draw from her is discomfiting, we probably won’t bother talking to her.

What’s the point, it’s easy to think, we’d probably only disagree.

**Objective One**

**DONNA BRAZILE** calls them green room conversions.

One of her more recent went something like this: Ms. Brazile, the garrulous Democratic strategist, found herself in the waiting room—known in the world of television talk shows as the green room—with Senator Rick Santorum, the conservative Republican from Pennsylvania who campaigned to defeat her candidate, Al Gore, in the 2000 presidential campaign.

The two, awkwardly thrown together with little to do except contemplate the pastry spread, started to chat politely.

“Santorum and I, we’re both Catholic, we’re both from large families and we just struck up a conversation that ended up continuing, and I went over to his office one morning and had breakfast,” Ms. Brazile said, ticking off the issues, from AIDS to faith-based institutions, on which the two have consulted since. “I have met a lot of people I would normally not even talk to,” said Ms. Brazile, a regular on the talk show circuit. “Sometimes in the green room you put all that aside. It’s time for small chatter.”

Kornblut recounts a number of green room conversations. “In an earlier, less polarized era—in the days when senators in opposing parties played poker, when partisan fund-raising had not yet become a blood sport—the camaraderie inside green rooms might not have been so noteworthy,” Kornblut writes.

But as the tenor in Washington has grown more rancorous over the last decade, bipartisan socializing has dwindled. With Republicans in control of both houses of Congress and the White House, there are ever fewer reasons for the two sides to exchange views, or even pleasantries.

These conversations lead to “conversations” in a fascinating way. These conversations don’t really lead to people changing their own views on issues; they lead to them changing their views of other people. In the green room:

the White House communications director, Dan Bartlett, who is often too busy to return reporters’ phone calls, found himself swapping parent- hood stories at the height of the 2004 campaign with Tad Devine, a Democratic rival on the Gore and John Kerry campaigns.

“You come to find out they have the same experiences and challenges you do: a family, balancing a campaign and kids,” Mr. Bartlett said. “I wouldn’t want to say it was a surprise, but it was good to see.”

Amazingly, it was “good to see” that this other person cares about his kids and his work and is having a hard time balancing the two. That this was “good to see” sadly indicates that before this green room conversation, the other could be imagined as devoid of any concern for family, work, and responsibility. The more we think that those with whom we disagree are less than human, the more impossible civil politics becomes. And the more we configure ourselves on a polarized landscape. And the more we avoid each other.

We need more “green rooms” for democracy, spaces in which we can stop avoiding moral conflict and work through our disagreements. I suspect that one of the first things we’d find is that we don’t disagree as much as or as deeply as we imagine—and the signs we rely on are not very reliable.

Gutmann and Thompson orient their books as a way to deal with the problem of moral disagreement—which they say...
In politics, disagreements often run deep.
If they did not, there would be no need for argument. But if they ran too deep, there would be no point in argument.

Moreover, only a small portion of deliberation follows the course of rational argument and the give and take of reasons. For the most part it proceeds with people explaining how they came to have the views they have and what their experiences are that shaped their sense of the world. In the course of these conversations, much like in green room conversions, participants change their views of others’ views. They enlarge their understanding of problems and begin to appreciate the complexity of how issues affect other members of the community. Sometimes, instead of reaching agreement, participants leave saying that they are more uncertain than ever. Deliberations can be very sobering as people learn more about the unintended consequences of their favorite policies. At the start, they may have had simple views of the problem and the solution, but at the end, this simplicity is devastated.

The salient feature of these deliberations is not a search for agreement; rather it is a sensitivity to others. To quote Harold Saunders, “politics is about relationships.” In a deliberative conversation we change the way we relate to others and we revise our views of policies because of what they will do to these others.

A decade after Democracy and Disagreement, we might change the phrase on the cover from “why moral conflict cannot be avoided” to “why we need to stop avoiding moral conflict.” The polarization we’ve sought to keep us safe from danger has only exacerbated the central political danger of damaging relationships, broken ones that let us demonize other people and their views.

Fortunately, we have an inclination that is stronger than the one of seeking safety by retreating into enclaves. It is the inclination to have a hand in shaping and healing public life, an inclination to participate in the whole. There’s the key to a green room for democracy.

Noelle McAfee is a political philosopher and research professor in the School of Communication at American University. She can be reached by e-mail at noelle_mcafee@mac.com.

“public office” of citizenship—deliberating publicly with a view to mutual accountability. Deliberative democracy nicely responds to these features of moral disagreement in politics because it is:

- a process that seeks deliberative agreement—on policies that can be provisionally justified to the citizens who are bound by them. Accountable agents reach out publicly to find reasons that others who are motivated to find deliberative agreement can also accept. When citizens and accountable officials disagree, and also recognize that they are seeking deliberative agreement, they remain willing to argue with one another with the aim of achieving provisionally justifiable policies that they all can mutually recognize as such.

- Gutmann and Thompson’s ideal of deliberative democracy is very much based on a philosophical tradition aimed at reaching agreement through the give and take of reasons. They see the deliberative process as a sort of philosophical point-counterpoint, with the back and forth of reasoned argument that continues until all agree on what principles and policies are justifiable, that is, until, as Jürgen Habermas puts it, the force of the better argument prevails.

When there is deliberative argumentation, the authors suggest, there is evidence that our moral disagreements are not really so deep. “In politics, disagreements often run deep,” they write. “If they did not, there would be no need for argument. But if they ran too deep, there would be no point in argument. Deliberative disagreements lie in the depths between simple misunderstanding and immutable irreconcilability.”

Deliberative democracy can only get off the ground if there is something uncertain and contested that we as a community need to decide, but also only if there are limits to uncertainty and contestedness. It also only gets off the ground if we are inclined to take part.

This is where many deliberative theorists falter. Their account for why people join deliberative public forums rests on the notion that citizens are amateur rational philosophers who love deliberation because “they are motivated to find deliberative agreement.”

Now, I ask any and all who have convened deliberative forums to say whether this is the reason that people attend. My sense—based on much observation—is that people attend forums because they are worried about what is happening to their communities and because they want to have a say in setting things on the right course. They want to make sure that their own concerns and perspectives are taken into consideration, even if that mucks up the chance of everyone agreeing on a course of action.

Objective One

is “formidable,” and which they say that democratic politics has so far not been able to cope. Democracy and Disagreement adopts deliberative democracy as a way to deal with these disagreements because it “secures a central place for moral discussion in political life.” Where other forms of politics allow members to avoid difficult conversation, deliberative democracy puts such conversations squarely at the center of politics.

The authors note that salient features of moral disagreement match central qualities of deliberative democracy. Our moral disagreements are, on the whole, disagreements about how policies can be designed so that they apply to everyone equally and are fair to all. And they involve people in public office—including the public office of citizenship—deliberating publicly with a view to mutual accountabilities. Deliberative democracy nicely responds to these features of moral disagreement in politics because it is:

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The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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Editors
David S. Frech
Libby Kingseed

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

Graphic Design and Production
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.