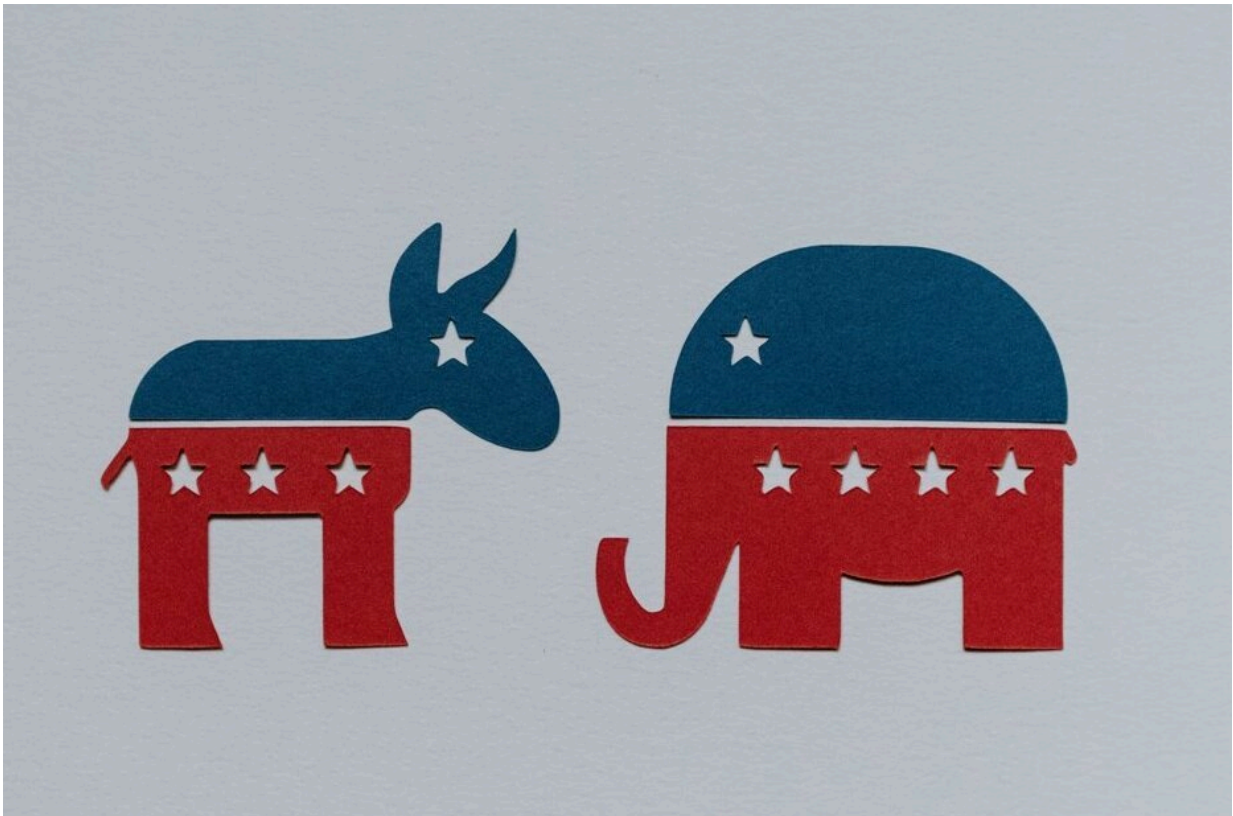


Book: Healing America's divisiveness requires changing how we think

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The tumultuous 2024 U.S. presidential election season is fraught with partisan battles over contentious issues such as abortion, immigration, racial violence and climate change.

In a national political culture so heated and discordant that expressing differing views is often met with attacks on the speaker's motives, patriotism and intelligence, is there a path forward to healing and civility?

A new book titled "The Certainty Trap: Why We Need to Question Ourselves More—and How We Can Judge Others Less," by University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign sociology professor Ilana Redstone says that much of the divisiveness in today's political discourse springs from certainty's toxic influence on our thinking and the assumptions we make about those who disagree with us. The book is scheduled for release on September 2 by Pitchstone Publishing.

Oftentimes, it's our lack of humility about our [core values](#), beliefs, principles and goals—and our refusal to see how, in many cases, other perspectives and solutions exist and are equally valid—that does the most damage, Redstone says.

Correcting the destructive course that the U.S. is currently on demands that we stop, take a breath—or perhaps two or three—and be open to critically examining our thinking, including our tendencies to label opposing arguments about prickly societal issues as right or wrong before defining the terms that we are supposedly arguing about. For example, how do we define the "costs" or "benefits" of the solutions that we are debating? And what others might there be that we haven't yet considered?

Redstone writes that "the challenge before us is to continually find the doubt and uncertainty, interrogate and clarify our thinking—each and every time we think the solution to a complex problem is obvious or easy."

"When it comes to the provisional nature of our knowledge—but also in

terms of being clear about what we think—we need to make an additional commitment. We need to understand that no ideas are exempt from criticism, questioning or examination. I would also say no idea is off the table or untouchable. And that can be very freeing," she said.

Certainty that we are right cultivates the conviction that our knowledge is definitive and distorts our thinking—an error in judgment that Redstone calls the "settled question fallacy." That is, we behave as though the reasons behind our position or judgment are conclusive, the path forward is obvious and the [right decision](#) is clear, failing to recognize that there is often a multiplicity of potential causes and that almost any solution has a combination of costs and benefits.

Redstone explains that the pitfall of blinded certainty is that it prompts us to shut down our thinking and close off inquiry and dialogue, particularly when we are confronted with those difficult, hot-button issues where we feel most threatened by disagreement. Throughout the book, she examines numerous examples of these issues—including biological sex and gender, wage inequality and gun control—that are flash points in today's culture wars as she discusses the need to broaden our thinking, begin asking more questions and be open to others asking them, too.

For example, the author points to the polarized media coverage and heated [public discourse](#) surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic safety mandates in early 2020. News stories either featured those who favored business closures and stay-at-home mandates to flatten the curve, slow transmission of the disease and prevent hospitals and health care agencies from being overwhelmed—or depicted those who questioned these measures as callous and indifferent to the potential loss of human life.

"(A)n uncertain response might have led us to a different set of

questions," she wrote. "How should we think about the economic and human costs of closing businesses? What's the right way to evaluate the mental health consequences that might come from the social isolation of being housebound?"

On this and other contentious, complex issues, "our deep need to simplify and have clarity often precludes us from a more complete understanding of the world we live in and the interactions in which we engage," Redstone observed.

Along with the political polarization dividing Democrats and Republicans, as well as other political groups, the ripple effects of the certainty trap include the erosion of our social trust, as well as an increase in extremism and violence, according to the author.

When we live in a world awash with information, misinformation and ambiguity, where we feel pressured to be "right," respond quickly and stridently defend our beliefs, how do we then avoid the certainty trap and its counterproductive and destructive outcomes, including ruptures in our personal relationships?

And, better yet, how do we prepare today's young people and [future generations](#) to listen to the better angels of their nature? How might we encourage them to think clearly and to carefully weigh all the potential causes and ramifications of a decision—before hitting "send" or, worse still, firing the first shot of that second civil war that growing numbers of Democrats and Republicans believe is "imminent?"

The good news, Redstone said, is that these skills can be taught, learned and practiced, and she describes several guidelines that can help people of all ages question and clarify their thinking. This can, in turn, lead us to have richer, more productive discussions than many of those that are currently contaminating our public discourse and fraying our social

bonds.

The author advocates teaching these skills from elementary school through college, so that interrogating and clarifying their thinking becomes natural for young people. By encouraging them to see nuance and complexity, and to be comfortable with uncertainty, Redstone says they may be less apt to judge or condemn those with whom they disagree.

According to the author, certainty and democracy are incompatible. And the risks of doing nothing as our conversational airspace shrinks into a no-fly-zone are great—and could cost us democracy itself.

However, surrendering our certainty can be difficult, Redstone acknowledges.

"But leaving it behind doesn't require anyone to admit to being wrong—and maybe you're not wrong at all. It means just being a little less sure you're right."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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