

THERAPY IN A TIME OF POLITICAL STRESS AND POLARIZATION

CENTER FOR PRACTICE TRANSFORMATION

MAY 14, 2021

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OVERVIEW

- 1. Political polarization
- 2. Effects on family and other social bonds
- 3. Clinical assessment issues for pairs divided by politics
- 4. Treatment issues
- 5. Community outreach: Braver Angels

THE CHALLENGE OF POLARIZATION

- Historic levels of political polarization
- Not just polarization on issues, but social or “affective” polarization characterized by
 - Othering: Seeing people who differ politically as essentially different or alien from
 - Aversion: Holding dislike and distrust for them as persons
 - Moralizing: Seeing them as bad people
- Ref. Finkel et al. (2020). “Political Sectarianism in America”
- Data point example: “inter-party marriage”
- Polarization has entered nearly every sector of life: family, work, civic organizations, colleges/universities

SOCIAL NETWORKS ARE COPING WITH POLITICAL STRESS

- Political polarization has invaded couple relationships, family life, and other important relationships in unprecedented ways.
- Politics has become part of core values and personal identity (red/blue)
- If the political “Other” is seen not just wrong, but deluded at best and evil (or abetting evil) at worst, what if that “Other” is a loved one?
- Blues in particular seem to be struggling with being married to/partnered with a Trump-supporting red.

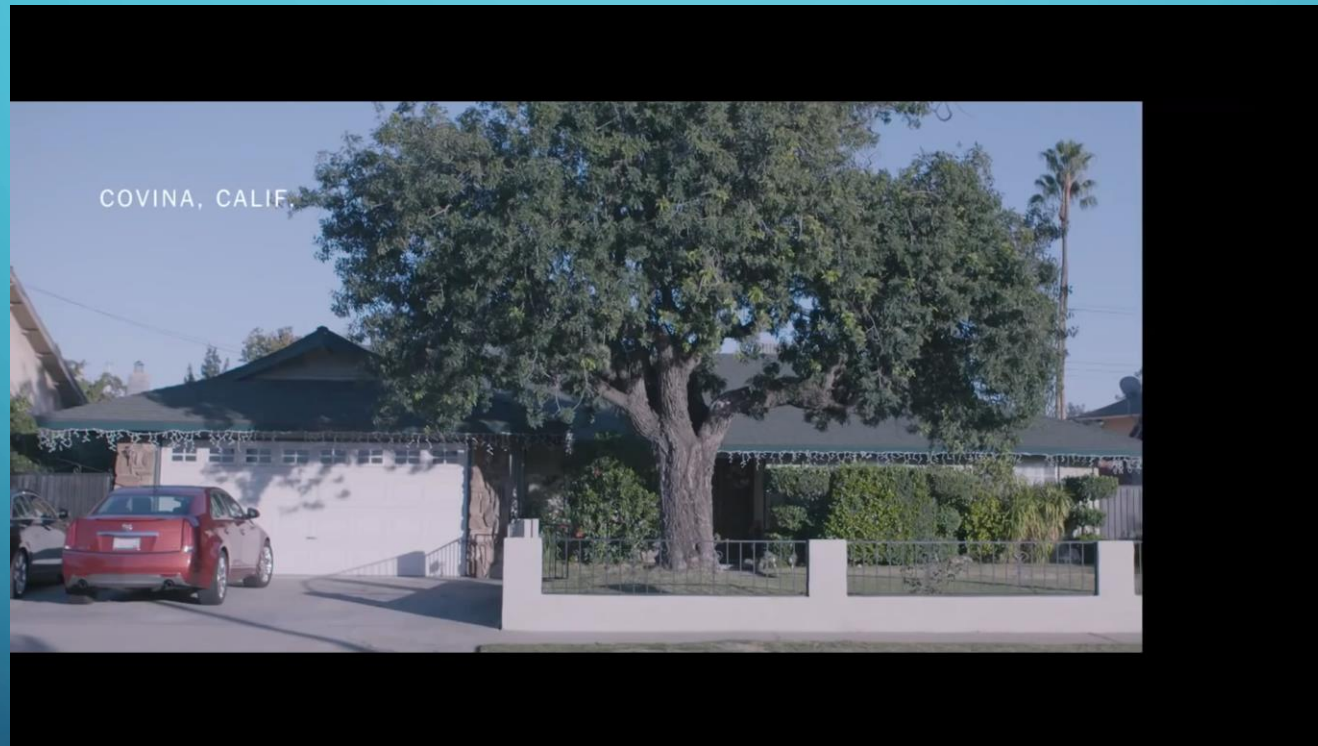
COUPLES AND FAMILY PAIRS DIVIDED BY POLITICS: ASSESSMENT ISSUES

- Are their political differences longstanding or recent? If recent, why now?
- Is this one of many differences they have conflict over, or more singular?
- Are they arguing a lot, occasionally, or keeping a brooding silence about politics?
- Is one of them “on the brink” with the difference, threatening divorce/breakup/cut off?

ASSESSMENT ISSUES

- Are third parties involved?
- Who is the main initiator of conflicted conversations, and how do they bring it up?
- How does the other partner respond and engage the conversations?
- Map out a common scene: the interactional context and sequence

MOTHER/DAUGHTER DIVIDED BY POLITICS



TREATMENT ISSUES

- Elicit commonality in values underneath their political differences.
- Work on differentiation and boundaries
 - Each person is entitled to their own political beliefs.
 - Losing one's own equilibrium over a partner's beliefs is usually a differentiation-of-self issue.

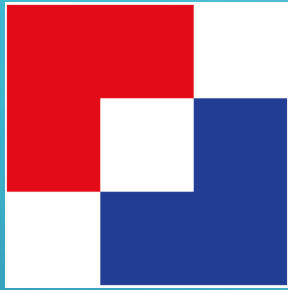
TREATMENT

- Help them identify and shift the coercive, “you are wrong/no I’m not” exchanges that are usually what create the antagonism.
- If they can’t manage political conversations, see if they can agree to eliminate them for the sake of their relationship. The key is to do this with equanimity rather than resentment.
- Externalize the problem by asking whether they want to allow political parties and politicians hurt their marriage?

TREATMENT

Sometimes it's helpful to talk with the more upset partner alone to help them to:

- a) differentiate their anger at a political party and its leaders from their spouse who supports them, and
- b) to decide if they want to blow up their marriage over this difference.

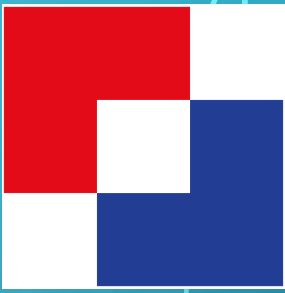


BRAVER ANGELS

[BRAVERANGELS.ORG](https://braverangels.org)

Our Mission

- **Braver Angels** is a citizens' organization uniting red and blue Americans in a working alliance to depolarize America.
- **As individuals**, we try to understand the other side's point of view, even if we don't agree with it.
- **In our communities**, we engage those we disagree with, looking for common ground and ways to work together.
- **In politics**, we support principles that bring us together rather than divide us.



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- Red/Blue Workshop
 - Skills for Bridging the Divide
 - Depolarizing Within
 - Families and Politics
 - 1:1 Conversations
 - Debates

VAN JONES COVERING A RED/BLUE WORKSHOP



HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

- Become a Braver Angels member (\$12/year)
- Take workshops (online, in person)
- Train to become a workshop moderator (training is free)