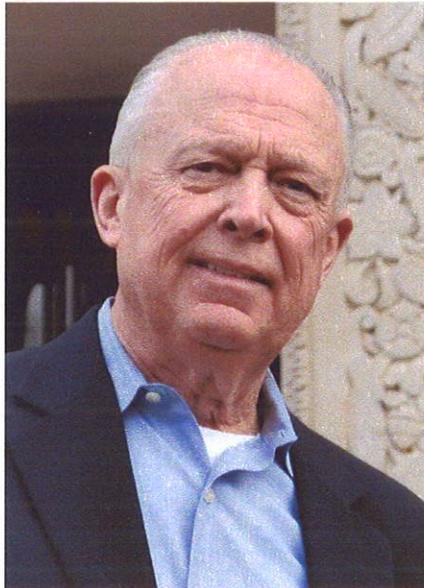


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Candidates should commit to civil, issue-based campaigns

By Richard Eckstrom Jan 11, 2018



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Tolerance for opposing views has been in decline in recent years, and markedly so in the 14 months since the 2016 presidential election.

Today, the atmosphere surrounding public debate is a toxic one. Contrary opinions are shouted down, and vitriol and endless recrimination are the new norm. In the race to portray the opposition in the harshest light possible, it is no longer considered out of bounds to impugn another person's character.

For some, hysteria-creation is the weapon of choice. Witness how some opponents of a federal tax cut reacted to its passage last month: House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi literally invoked the end times, saying "This is Armageddon." Other critics called it "the nation's nightmare" and "treasonous."

Well-reasoned debate and amicable disagreement seem like a memory from a long ago era.

Of course, despite what some may want to believe, there's plenty of blame to go around for the current toxicity. It wasn't long ago that President Obama's supporters frequently accused his detractors of incivility... but as power in Washington changes hands, the shoes change feet. Now many of those same folks are hurling the invective they once decried.

Americans won't be coming together anytime soon to sing "Kumbaya" in blissful harmony. But it's not too much to ask that we tamp down some of the rancor, pettiness, and over-the-top indignation which pollute the dialogue. In 2018, candidates for elected office can help lead the way toward greater civility.

This is an election year, when South Carolinians will go to the polls to fill many local, state and federal positions. Those seeking your votes can do their own part to elevate the debate by waging campaigns focused on issues and qualifications – and resisting the temptation to "sling mud."

Civility is contagious. Each candidate who rejects personal attacks or below-the-belt tactics raises the bar, even if ever so slightly. The more who search for success on high roads, the fewer will be those who find it acceptable to take low roads.

Why does it matter? First of all, our communities, state and nation face some formidable challenges – challenges which are best met through serious, rational debate. The eye-gouging and groin-kicking ultimately rob us of the serious discussion needed to find solutions.

And there's evidence that such a caustic debate climate dissuades many ordinary folks from becoming engaged in the process. That's a shame, because a healthy system of government depends on heavy citizen-participation.

Positive, issue-oriented campaigns not only help facilitate a more constructive discussion, but they set the right example for future generations of aspiring public servants.

None of this is to suggest that candidates should never criticize each other. Certainly, criticism is often justified, even valuable in helping voters size up candidates' differences. And yes, it's important to stand firm for closely held convictions.

But attacks which are personal in nature, irrelevant to the issues, or overblown only demean a vital process, and they ill-serve the voters who must sort through the muck.

In the coming months, many men and women vying for your votes will be proclaiming their desire to improve their community and to look out for your interests. Those who are sincere can match their words with deed, starting by conducting campaigns that keep issues and qualifications at the forefront. Voters too can play a role by letting the candidates know what kind of campaign you expect -- and refusing to reward those who choose to wallow in the mud.

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