Communicating About Science Across the Political Divide Workshop

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Workshop Structure

- *Part 1* – Introduction: Who Am I? Who Are You?
- *Part 2* – Five(ish) Tips for Communicating Science Across the Political Divide
- *Part 3* – Role-Playing: Acting Out Conversations about Vaccines, Climate Change, and AI
- *Part 4* – Conclusion: Reflections on Conversations and Workshop

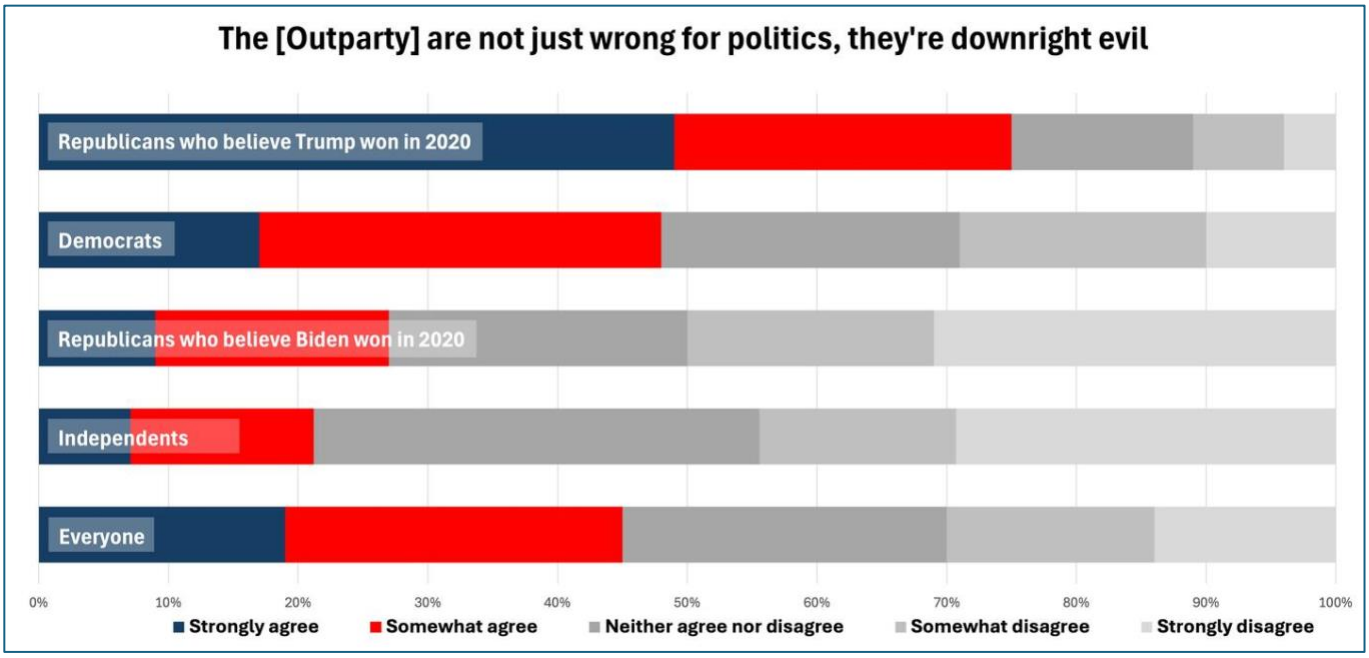
Part 1: Introduction: Who Am I? Who Are You?

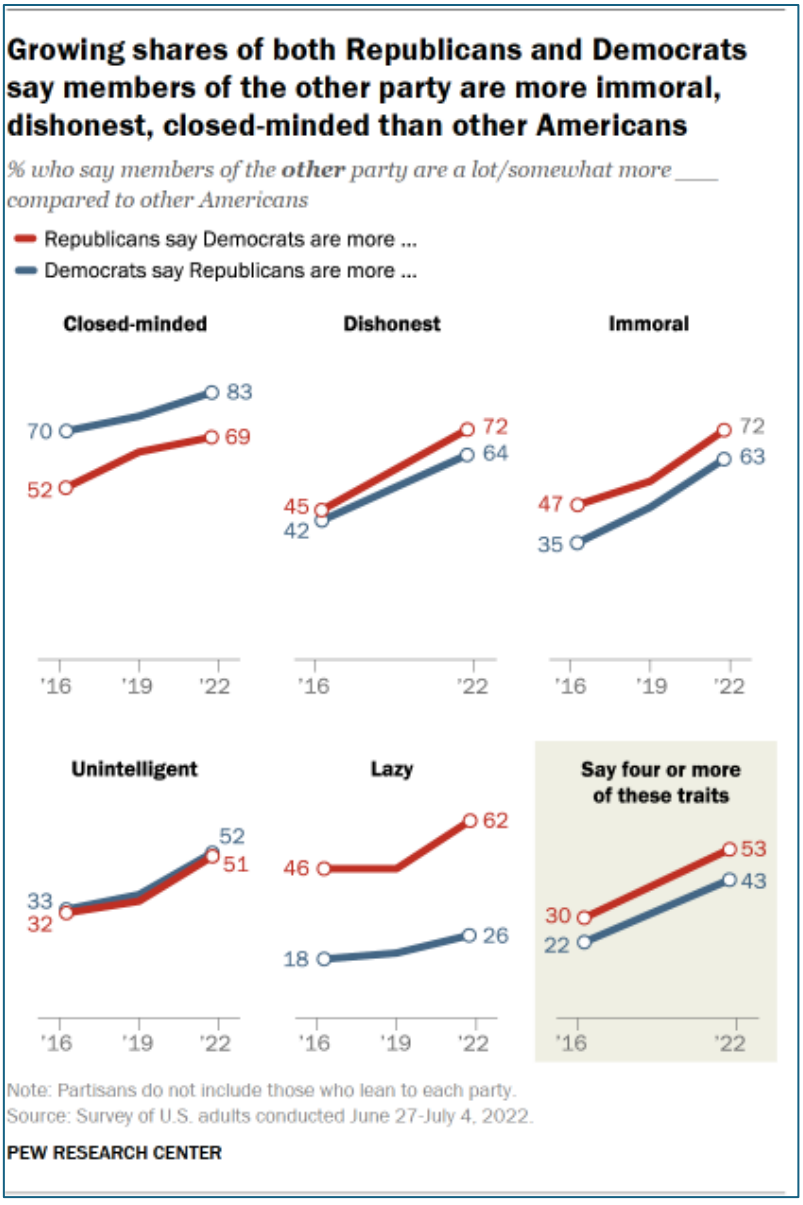
Who Am I?

- I'm a postdoc at the Penn Center for Science, Sustainability, and the Media, which is based at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.
- I conduct research that bridges work in philosophy and the social sciences with the aim of understanding how the communicative practices of scientists, journalists, and technology can foster trust and ease polarization.
- In 2025, I completed a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Penn with a dissertation entitled, "Communicating Policy-Relevant Science in a Pluralistic Society."
- Before this, I was a science journalist for 10 years, including working for FactCheck.org, where I vetted claims by U.S. politicians and misinformation on social media about climate change, public health, and other topics.

Who Are You?

Please take a moment to recall experiences you've had with trying to communicate science across the political divide. These could include conversations with strangers, colleagues, loved ones, journalists, etc. What did you feel went right or wrong? How were you hoping the conversation would go? If you can't think of such an instance, you can also share why you came to this workshop and what you're hoping to get out of it.


The [Outparty] are not just wrong for politics, they're downright evil
Republicans who believe Trump won in 2020
Democrats
Republicans who believe Biden won in 2020
Independents
Everyone
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%
Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree


Growing shares of both Republicans and Democrats say members of the other party are more immoral, dishonest, closed-minded than other Americans
% who say members of the other party are a lot/somewhat more ___ compared to other Americans
Republicans say Democrats are more ...
Democrats say Republicans are more ...
Closed-minded
70
83
52
69
'16
'19
'22
Dishonest
45
42
72
64
'16
'22
Immoral
47
35
72
63
'16
'19
'22
Unintelligent
33
32
52
51
'16
'19
'22
Lazy
46
18
62
26
'16
'19
'22
Say four or more of these traits
30
22
53
43
'16
'22
Note: Partisans do not include those who lean to each party.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 27-July 4, 2022.
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Part 2 – Five(ish) Tips for Communicating Science Across the Political Divide

These tips will sound obvious. The problem is that we often don't apply them in our day-to-day lives. My goal today is to condense and justify them, so that you can easily remember them in times of need. This workshop concentrates on verbal communication, but the tips can be applied to written communication.

Tips in a nutshell:

1. Avoid persuasion.
2. Listen first.
3. Practice empathy.
4. Practice responsiveness.
5. Practice humility.

0. Don't have conversations with people who don't make you feel safe.

- Yes, we want to bridge the political divide about science, but not if that means putting your safety at risk.

1. Avoid persuasion

"Grant that I may not so much seek to be understood as to understand." – Saint Francis of Assisi

- This quote encapsulates this tip. If two people go into a conversation with the intent of persuading the other of their POV, then it's likely that neither of them will end up being understood nor understanding the other.
- Whereas if two people go into a conversation with the intent of understanding the other's POV, then there's a higher likelihood of both coming out of the conversation understanding the other and being understood.
- What if you're the only one trying to understand the other person's POV, and they're not doing the same? This problem will be addressed by another tip!
- How do we know that pushing your POV on someone can backfire?
- When we push our POV on someone else at the get-go of a conversation, we don't yet have a clear understanding of what motivates their beliefs. So, we're left with supporting our POV with our values or supporting it with facts.
- First, if we support our POV with our values, and they don't align with the other person's, then this is likely not going to succeed.
- Second, research suggests that people tend to double down on their beliefs when presented with fact-based information contrary to their views. This is called the backfire effect (a.k.a. belief perseverance).
- This isn't to say that persuasion is impossible, but it can't be what we aim for at the get-go.

2. Listen first

- First, we have to listen. However, listening is hard, especially when it comes to someone we disagree with.
- Research shows that listening to someone we disagree with uses up a lot of cognitive and emotional resources, much more than when we agree.
- So, the first step of listening entails listening to what's going on in your own body and taking a few breaths when you feel the temperature rising.
- To understand people's POV, we have to be active listeners. Two keys to active listening are paraphrasing and asking questions.
- Sometimes, just deeply understanding why a person holds the view they do is enough. If we could do merely this as a country, we'd be in a much better place.
- Communicating science across the political divide isn't just about opening other people's minds to the magnificence of science. It's also about opening your own mind to different worldviews.

3. Practice empathy.

- In addition to asking clarification questions, it's useful to ask questions about a person's life.
- You might also find that you share certain experiences or beliefs, which creates common ground.
- Creating common ground, research suggests, is key to becoming more open to another person's perspective.

4. Practice responsiveness.

- We can find versions of responsiveness in how we communicate person-to-person, how we think about what it means to organize society democratically, and how we think about scientific progress.
- Active listening techniques have a flavor of responsiveness, i.e., using engaged body language, e.g., making eye contact, nodding, and facing your body towards the other person.
- Research also suggests that two-sided messaging is a successful tactic for correcting misinformation. Two-sided messaging entails not only communicating your own perspective but also acknowledging why someone would hold the perspective they do.
- Researchers argue two-sided messaging works because "acknowledging the target's opinion is conceptually similar to doing a favor." Both are "[b]ased on the social influence principle of reciprocity...if a speaker seems open to the target's position, the target should reciprocate by being more open to the speaker's view."
- You can also be responsive by making explicit that you're open to persuasion. Showing this openness tends to lead people to be open to persuasion as well.
- Responsiveness also comes in when we think about what scientists call moral reframing. This entails reframing scientific (or other) issues with the person's values in mind. Research suggests this can shift people's opinions.
- Responsiveness is also key to justifications for democracy as a form of governance.
- A core part of democratic governance, when done right, is listening to constituents and formulating policies that align with their values. If we can't create policies that do so, leaders should at least explain why they can't.
- We also see responsiveness in science itself. When scientists are responsive to the evidence, they get closer to the truth. So, explaining what evidence could change your mind might also be a way practice responsiveness.

5. Practice humility.

"In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities, but in the expert's, there are few." – Zen Master Suzuki Roshi

- In essence, this quote means we should keep an open mind and not get too hardened in our beliefs.
- Scientific experts are capable of keeping an open mind! Being responsive requires keeping an open mind.
- Another way of looking at this tip: We should acknowledge the uncertainties often embedded in the data.
- This is especially the case with policy-relevant science. There are many reasons for this, including the complex nature of the relevant systems under study and the ethical limitations of experimentation on them.
- Politicians on both sides of the aisle often argue that the "science supports" their policy choice, but the reality is that the science was uncertain, and they were making value judgments in the face of that uncertainty.
- Politicians aren't the only ones susceptible to this. In seminal work, the philosopher Heather Douglas outlines how policy-relevant science is rife with value judgments, e.g., COVID-19 lockdowns, pesticide toxicity.
- Part of being humble means getting clear about when we're having factual disagreements and when we're having value disagreements. Remember to ask yourself, is this a factual disagreement or a value disagreement?
- Another part of humility: Avoid jargon when you're talking with someone who doesn't have your expertise.
- How do you do this? One way is to start with an idea that you think the person would be familiar with. I call this the pyramid of science communication.

6. Avoid social media.

- Don't try to have political conversations about science (or otherwise) on social media. The platforms, as they exist right now, aren't capable of instigating successful democratic deliberation.