

Kristie Trinh, NE – 2023

“Americans Are Tired of Political Division. Here’s How to Bridge It,” *Times Magazine*.

“Measuring America’s Divide: ‘It’s Gotten Worse,’” *The New York Times*.

“Is There a Cure For Political Polarization?” *The Washington Post*.

Amidst headlines of political polarization plastering the news, I began to lose hope in the nation’s capital. Filibuster stops productivity in our Congress, and our government faces constant threats of political extremism. Expecting this trend to be reflected in the delegates of the 61st annual United States Senate Youth Program, I was pleasantly surprised to find the opposite to be true.

Instead, the reality was 104 young adults more willing to talk it out with one another than the generation before. Personally, I approached the program as someone who politically aligned with the far left and the Democratic party, but as I sat and listened to those around me, I found myself slowly shifting closer to the center of the political and ideological spectrum. When you are listening to sound and warranted arguments from people you do not necessarily align with, it is easy to jump to conclusions. As a Congressional debater, I often find myself rushing to refute the other side. In fact, I know this to be true for my fellow delegates as well. But this time, I noticed there were no leaps; there were no jumps. I, and everyone around me, just sat and listened.

Mara Karlin, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities, told us “It is okay for the path to get a little bit less clear.” Although she was referring to our career paths and post-secondary education journey, her quote very well applies to our growth ideologically. I came into this program very adamant about my ideals. Coming from a state that had very stark contrasts in views and rampant polarization, I often had to stand my ground and defend my beliefs. I believed that my perspective was exclusively correct because when you are in a constant state of needing to guard yourself against people who undermine your values, it becomes difficult to compromise. But now, exposed to beliefs that were not so black and white, or in this case red and blue, the path became a little less clear.

I had the opportunity to ask Elizabeth MacDonough, Senate Parliamentarian, the question, “Many say political polarization has increased in the past few years, as a neutral arbiter of the Senate, have you observed this to be true and how has the dynamic affected you?” She responded with a powerful sentiment. Sharing her first-hand experience with the January 6th insurrection, she was frank about the trauma and fear it brought her. MacDonough told us, “Things that are facts often get politicized when they shouldn’t be, and this greatly affects people who don’t get a say because they are neutral.”

Dumbfounded, I was at a crossroads. It felt like the ideological beliefs that I had held for so long were slowly uprooted. I realized, however, that there is no all-encompassing point of view. Karlin was right and that it was, in fact, okay that the path was becoming less clear. All 104 of us each have unique experiences and distinct backgrounds that come together to explain why we hold the beliefs that we have. My perspectives warrant a change, then, as my horizons broadened while interacting with new people.

Indeed, not only is change warranted for these beliefs, but they should be welcomed and embraced. When considering the comments from MacDonough, this prevalent and pertinent polarization is a result of politicizing our perspectives. Often, we forget the delineation between the political parties (Democrats and Republicans) and the ideological spectrum (liberal and conservative). However, the distinction between these two topics is key when we move to address polarization. Because while the parties of the U.S. are inherently political, our ideologies are not. This is a fact and one that should not be politicized but often is.

My ideological beliefs are ones that I hold very close and dear to my heart. They reflect the generational trauma of colonization in Vietnam. They reflect the economic system that prevents my refugee parents from seeing economic mobility. They reflect the education system that deters first-generation college students like my sister and me from post-secondary education. My beliefs pull from all aspects of my identity. This is why when people challenged my beliefs from solely a political party stance, I instinctively defended myself.

At the United State Senate Youth Program, my beliefs were not being challenged but for the first time, heard. I had not ever interacted with so many unique people from so many different backgrounds that held such a broad range of beliefs. Like a mutualistic relationship, as I listened to others, they listened to me as well.

When you take a step back and realize that everyone's ideological beliefs are also made up of aspects of their lives and their own experiences, it is difficult to tell someone they are wrong in the beliefs that they hold. By distinguishing between ideological beliefs and political parties, we begin on a path toward depoliticizing the facts that are true to each of us individually. So when the *Washington Post* asks about a cure for political polarization, the answer resides in when the youth listen to each other's stories.