



NonPartisan Coalition

- Strengthening Communities
- Advocating for Government that Serves the Community

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Please visit our web site at:

www.NonPartisanCoalition.net

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Can We Have Civil Discourse?

In our September 1, 2019 NPC Newsletter we had an article about Tribalism. Given what we know about tribalism and how dug-in each of us feels about our own political point of view, can we actually have a civil political discussion with someone from an opposing point of view?

Unless we understand what is going wrong, we have as much chance of winning someone over to our point of view as they have of winning us over. There are road blocks all of us use in making “points” that derail any chance at keeping the discourse civil. Before we can improve, let’s analyze the problem.

Recognizing Road Blocks to Discussion

Road Block #1: “Whataboutism” Stops Our Ability to Focus on Facts

Many people haven’t heard the term “whataboutism”. Here is how it is defined in [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com): “a conversational tactic in which a person responds to an argument or attack by changing the subject to focus on someone else’s misconduct, implying that all criticism is invalid because no one is completely blameless: *Excusing your mistakes with whataboutism is not the same as defending your record.*” (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/whataboutism>.)

Whataboutism has become so common in political discourse that most people don’t even realize the damage it is doing. See page 2 for a non-political example of whataboutism.

Steering Committee Report

- We are preparing to offer a series of "Get to Know NPC" events. These events will bring together people from diverse backgrounds and points of view.
- At the "Get to Know NPC" we will model how to find common ground and how to use that to improve our communities.

NonPartisanCoalitionNPC@gmail.com

Web Site- Check it Out!

- Thanks to Carol Relitz our web site is a place where community members can find resources. Please visit our web site at: www.NonPartisanCoalition.net
- Submit articles for our web site or newsletter to:
NonPartisanCoalitionNPC@gmail.com

Our Leadership Team

Carol Jenkins- founder

Jeff Jenkins- co-founder

Anita Brown- recording secretary

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Whataboutism Example

Scenario: A customer bought a used car, but after getting the monthly payment, they find they have been charged a lot more than expected. The customer suspects they have been scammed so they go back to talk to the salesman.

Customer: There is a problem with my bill.

Salesman: What seems to be the problem?

Customer: This monthly payment is far more than we agreed on. When I looked at the paperwork, there are a lot of charges added that I didn't agree to pay.

Salesman: Well, the fact is that you told me your credit score was excellent and upon further investigation that turned out not to be true. So, in reality, you are the one that lied to us.

The salesman here is not giving facts about the extra charges. Instead, he is turning the tables on the customer, putting them on the defensive. Because the salesman has a lot of practice with substituting his wrong-doing with a customer's misstep (or even an invented misstep), he knows the majority of customers will abandon the facts about the extra charges and instead try to defend their own honor.

The New Yorker described the whataboutism technique as "a strategy of false moral equivalences".^[32] Even if the customer did misrepresent their credit score, it is not morally equivalent to charging extra fees.

In the realm of political discourse, examples of whataboutism abound. According to Wikipedia, whataboutism "is employed as a propaganda technique. It is used as a diversionary tactic to shift the focus off of an issue and avoid having to directly address it. This technique works by twisting criticism back onto the critic and in doing so revealing the original critic's hypocrisy. The usual syntax is "What about...?" followed by an issue on the opponent's side which is *vaguely*, if at all, related to the original issue."

<https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Whataboutism>

Another way to put this, the discussion is entered into in "bad faith", making the chance of useful discourse unlikely.

Bad Faith Discourse

The first step in improving our own ability to have productive political discourse is recognizing the traps and/or road blocks that are being set. If you realize that someone is arguing in bad faith, what do the experts recommend?

“Sadly, when someone is arguing with you in bad faith, you don’t have as many options. You will not be able to convince them of your point and they are probably going to try to antagonize you, because provoking an emotional response will make it harder for you to correctly respond to what they have said.

First and foremost, try not to get upset as they may find some sort of victory in the fact that they have angered you. One-on-one conversation entered into in bad faith is best met with walking away. However, if there are others listening who you would like to convince, change tack and redirect your argument to the audience. Presenting a convincing argument to an audience when the person arguing with you is being unreasonable won’t convince them, but it might just convince the people listening in.” (<https://www.occupy.com/article/whataboutism-part-ii-how-argue-politics-with-people-you-don-t-agree-with#sthash.bCTq5iCH.dpbs>)

How to Deal With Whataboutism

(<https://www.occupy.com/article/whataboutism-part-ii-how-argue-politics-with-people-you-don-t-agree-with#sthash.bCTq5iCH.dpbs>)

When someone uses whataboutism because they are just repeating what they have heard, what can you do? Many of the suggestions below are the same as recommendations we’ve made in the past, but they bear repeating, especially since these recommendations are based on research.

“1: FIGURE OUT WHERE THEY ARE COMING FROM: Whatever your political leanings, people are just people, so try to figure out what common ground you do have. This can be something as simple as both loving the sunshine or thinking cats are cute. No matter how divisive our politics, there are still some things we can all agree on. Find and use these shared commonalities to be more convincing to others, not just yourself.

2: RE-FRAME THE ARGUMENT: In a study of political arguments and their persuasiveness, Stanford sociologist Robb Willer found that the most effective way to argue your point is to frame it in the moral system of the person you are talking to. The study revealed that messages were much more persuasive when they fit into the moral framework of the target audience. Morality itself is not as clear-cut as it seems, Willer suggested in the study. “Morality can be a source of political division, a barrier to building bi-partisan support for policies. But it can also be a bridge if you can connect your position to your audience’s deeply held moral convictions.”

3. KEEP THINGS FOCUSED One of the hallmarks of Whataboutism is that it muddies the argument. Point out they're not actually addressing what you said, adding “that’s an interesting point, we can discuss that later but let’s talk about just this right now.” Keep things focused on the issue at hand.”

It takes practice to avoid getting into a heated political discussion. Try talking to someone you agree with and discuss with them a time they wish they had a better response. Together, play out a better reaction.

Consumer Protection Resource

<http://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/default.aspx>

Maryland State Consumer Protection Division

The Consumer Protection Division provides mediation services to consumers to help resolve complaints against businesses and health insurance carriers. The Division also provides information about complaints that have been filed against businesses, information regarding new home builder or health club registration, and provides publications to help consumers make good decisions in the marketplace.

Services

- [File a Consumer Complaint](#)
- [Mediation and Arbitration](#)
- [Identity Theft](#)
- [Home Builder Information](#)
- [Home Builder Guaranty Fund](#)
- [Home Builder Sales Representative](#)
- [Immigration Fraud/Fraude de Inmigracion](#)
- [Vehicle Protection Product Warranty Registration Program](#)
- [Homeowners, Condominium, Timeshare Open Records and Meetings Law](#)
- [Foreclosure Counseling Services Law](#)
- [Mortgage Services](#)
- [Structured Settlement Transferee Registration](#)
- [Tips on Choosing an Electricity Supplier](#)
- [Consumer Recalls](#)

E-mail: Consumer@oag.state.md.us

Consumer Hotline: 410-528-8662, En español 410-230-1712,
888-743-0023 toll-free

Medical Billing/Health Insurance Problems: 877-261-8807 toll-free