Social Media, Soundbites, and the Political Divide:

A Generation Defined by Polarization

by Grace Girdner

My face turned bright red as I looked at the long response my friend sent me. What could it be? Glancing down at my phone, I realized I had accidentally sent her a video about abortion that was meant for my sister. I braced myself as I read her angry message. As a high school senior in Santa Fe, New Mexico with conservative views, this is a response I face often when I share my opinions or beliefs with my peers. Political polarization in our country has created an animosity in American youth where we tend to see each other through the lens of our political leanings, often influenced by social media posts and soundbites rather than thorough research and personal conviction. Personally, I often feel frightened to share in class discussions, as I can quickly be classified as a bigot if I show my Biblically based beliefs on current issues. There seems to be a common ideology in the public education system in our state that paints "bad guys" and "good guys", and whether you are left-leaning or conservative, we have become so polarized that we have begun to classify people based on their politics and not on their character.

The day after this incident with my friend, she barely talked to me. My other friends treated me differently, and I came to realize she had told them about my pro-life post which in their mind makes me anti-woman. There was no attempt at conversation or debate, just discord. One thing I have realized is one simply can't be friends with the opposing party, we're expected to hate. Hate the opinion, hate the perspective, and hate the person. I'd be lying if I said I've never fallen into this trap, and the problem is ignorance. Once my friend knew I was conservative she lost all respect for me as an individual, and in turn I was tempted to lose respect for her as well. Not only do these ignorant echo chambers create fear and anxiety, but complete isolation. Polarization leads to strained connections that can create conflicts with family and friends. Young individuals only Identify with their political party, and if that's not bad enough the spread of misinformation creates a catalyst for misguided beliefs and confusion.

To change this ongoing epidemic of hatred it's important to facilitate conversations. Creating safe spaces for discussions where young individuals can express differing views without fear of backlash. We need to be teaching our youth self-awareness to reflect on biases, beliefs and values while promoting personal growth and empathy. All these values need to be reflected in our educational system, one of the biggest things we should be advocating for is educational reform. Our teachers should be held to a standard of presenting different viewpoints and encouraging fact-finding research rather than sharing

their own opinions and political stance and grooming students to share their narrative. But the most important conversations need to take place at home. My ability to reason and discuss topics comes from the example I have seen in my home, as I was raised to research things to find out what is factual and true before jumping to a conclusion based solely on my political stance. Taking these steps can help mitigate polarization and create a culture where diverse views are more embraced and accepted.