

When Partisanship Goes Too Far

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I'm attracted to organizations like the Blue Dog Caucus and No Labels precisely because they advocate for bi-partisan solutions between the parties. Partisanship in itself is not inherently wrong. It serves a purpose but it can be taken too far and the dangers of this are very real and I'm afraid we've crossed those lines in the current era.

The Constitution says nothing about political parties. From a constitutional perspective they are not inherent to our government. Nevertheless, they are as old as the founding of the Nation. The first political parties formed informally: they were the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists. The Federalists advocated for a constitution that created a strong central federal government. The Anti-Federalists sought a confederation of states as opposed to a strong central federal government. The Federalists won.

In their push for states' ratification of the Constitution, the Federalists published the Federalist Papers in various newspapers. These essays advocated for the adoption of the Constitution and serve as a window for interpreting the Constitution at the source. In Federalist Paper #10, James Madison, describes the rise of political parties, which he portrays as "factions" united by shared interests and passions. Madison was not an advocate or a detractor of a party system but rather saw the emergence of political parties or factions as inherent to human nature. Madison advocated for reason and wisdom and believed that sheer geographic size of the American Republic would prevent "passions" from spreading too rapidly. He argued that the United States would be protected from over-zealous passion in irrational ideas or demagogic leaders because the geographic size of the US would not allow passions to travel fast enough to maintain their fervor and therefore reason would be given time to extinguish the fire of such dangers. But Madison did not predict the era of mass-media, let alone the era of social media.

Since the 1980s, there has been a steady polarization between the political parties. This is to say that they are moving further to the extremes in their orientation. It was not always the case that Republican translated into conservative and Democrat translated into liberal. Before the Reagan years there were plenty of Republican liberals and Democratic conservatives. According to recent research, the degree to which individuals have homogenized their beliefs so that they lean either all conservative or all liberal has also doubled in the last two decades and this has fallen on party lines. This is to say that there was a time when people were more apt to think liberally on some topics and

conservatively on other topics as opposed to absolute in all areas. Consider that in *Roe Vs. Wade*, five of the seven majority justices were Republican!

Madison was right in predicting that political parties are an inherent fact of a large polity with an orientation towards individual liberty. But the increasing polarization of contemporary politics presents an inherent danger which exacerbates pressing issues such as climate change, fiscal responsibility, health care, reproductive rights, gun rights, etc. As Lincoln said “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Lincoln himself was referencing the Gospel of Mark. The issue at stake is the heart and soul of our Nation: the Constitution as the founders conceived it.

Madison recognized that political parties represented an inherent danger to the Nation but to suppress them would be to suppress liberty and to do so would be the greater evil. Thus, in *Federalist Paper 10*, we can assert that political parties have a constitutional right for existence. But the polarization of our parties has taken us to a point where we’re too frequently seeing an all-out attempt to completely delegitimize the opposing party. This is where it gets dangerous.

There are two dangers here. The first is that it’s easy to provoke the heightened animosities along party boundaries and doing so serves our enemies. In social psychology it’s well established that ‘like’ begets “like.” This is to say that another voice on any given stance serves to give it a little more credence and legitimacy or as Madison might say: fuel the “passion.” In our era of social media anybody can publish anything and instantly put it before a crowd of those united by similar passions to fuel the fire. Make no mistake, the enemies of the United States are doing just that. They have no preference between liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat. It is simply enough to fan the flames of division. There are no doubt armies of intelligence personnel in China, Russia, and Iran, amongst others, posing as Americans commenting under news stories, on Twitter, YouTube and under many different political forums endorsing the most extreme and divisive partisan positions—giving perceived social legitimacy to Americans who would do the same.

The second danger comes from the fact that political parties serve as an informal checks and balance. When polarization takes us to the point that we will argue against the legitimacy of the opposing party then we’re taking a position against liberty. Every dictatorship of the twentieth century emerged from a party platform that sought to suppress all other political parties: The National Socialist German Worker’s Party (Nazi), FET (Falange of Franco Spain), Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mao’s Communist Party, Mussolini’s National Fascist Party. Once these parties seized power they sought to consolidate it by delegitimizing any opposing party. In a dictatorship, party loyalty becomes synonymous to patriotism. So when we as Americans take our partisan position to such an extreme that we perceive our chosen political party as the

sole legitimate expression of American governance then we endorse a view that is very contrary to the founding principal of the Nation. This is the principal given to us by Madison in his own acknowledgment that the suppression of political factions is contrary to liberty and therefore the greater evil.

In today's political rhetoric, the word "Democrat" or "Republican" takes on a very negative connotation if you're standing in the opposing camp. It shouldn't be that way. Our Constitution was framed to facilitate differences of opinion through political discourse. Politicians carry a huge burden of blame for the growing polarizing of American politics. If you take strong partisan positions it rallies the base and gets emotions up. It's really a powerful tool. If you can paint Democrats as communists or Republicans as bigoted with one broad stroke then the issues don't really matter because the opposing camp is simply and inherently bad, thus creating a need for party solidarity against the perceived opposing evil. It's an easy thing to do and it's a powerful thing to do but it's also wrong.

The bottom line: party loyalty is not patriotism. Extinguishing the opposition and holding to one's party as the sole legitimate answer is contrary to our constitutional beginnings and its underlying magnanimous philosophy. It's for this reason that I see a commitment to bipartisanship as its own platform in light of the growing polarization of the political environment and the willingness of foreign enemies to exploit the divide. I see the willingness to overcome the divide as potentially the most important issue pressing this Nation. We must accept that we are a nation of plurality and encourage the return to civic discourse as the norm because that's what the founders of this Nation intended and continues to serve as best path forward for the preservation of the Union.