

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-true-divide-pluralists-vs-zealots-power-democracy-partisanship-institutions-twitter-echo-chamber-neighbor-11672657710>

OPINIONCOMMENTARY [Follow](#)

## America's True Divide: Pluralists vs. Zealots

Stop making politics about partisan identities and tribalism and get back to persuasion and policy.

By Ben Sasse

Jan. 2, 2023 12:27 pm ET

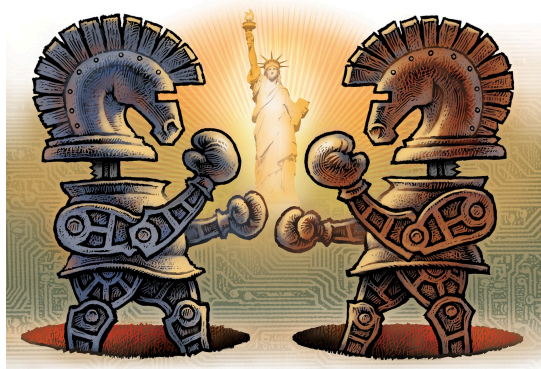


ILLUSTRATION: PHIL FOSTER

The most important divide in American politics isn't red versus blue. It's civic pluralists versus political zealots. This is the truth no one in Washington acknowledges but Americans must realize if we're going to recover.

Civic pluralists understand that ideas move the world more than power does, which is why pluralists value debate and persuasion. We believe America is great because it is good, and America is good because the country is committed to human dignity, even for those with whom we disagree. A continental nation of 330 million souls couldn't possibly agree on everything, but we can hash out our disagreements in the communities where we live and the institutions we build. The small but important role of government, for the civic pluralist, is a framework for ordered liberty. Government doesn't give us rights, or meaning, or purpose or permission. It exists to protect us from the whims of mobs and majorities.

Political zealots reject this, holding that society starts and ends with power. Government in their view isn't to protect from the powerful or the popular. More than anything else, zealots—on the right and the left—seek total victory in the public square. They believe that the center of life is government power. They preach jeremiads of victimhood and decline. On the left, they want a powerful bureaucracy. On the right, they want a strongman. But they agree on a central tenet: Americans are too weak to solve problems with persuasion. They need the state to do it.

The zealots thrive in the chaos of the current moment. We are living in a disrupted age. The Digital Revolution has shifted Americans' technological, economic, geographic and cultural life, and our political disruption is the result of these changes in our ways of feeling and thinking.

Modern media, through myriad outlets at our fingertips, all of them small and narrowly targeted, has transformed Americans' conception of community. As communications become more instantaneous, we've become siloed and more lonely. We know less about our neighbors and more about the viral nut jobs who reinforce our polarized political opinions. Social media, cable television and click-bait news amplify the angriest voices. This is a casino business model, trying to captivate audiences instead of informing them. Social algorithms run on rage. Good-faith arguments don't go viral.

The stupidity of tribalism has made politics primarily about partisan identities, not persuasion or policy. The screamers on the right and left fuel one another. In a nation as big as ours, there is always someone somewhere saying something stupid—but tribalism takes this fact as its lifeblood. And it's the excuse for otherwise civic-minded Americans to ignore the nuts in their own party and obsess only over the nuts in the other party. We're tempted to think that the enemy of my

enemy is my friend. It takes a genuine leader to remind us that most of the time, the enemy of our enemy is still a jackass.

Through all this the Senate has been AWOL. At every other disruptive moment in American history, the Senate had something to contribute. Leaders stood up to debate our country's challenges: Webster, Clay, Chase Smith, Dirksen, Moynihan. These were leaders who had something to say about the future. You could agree or disagree, love or hate them, but you had to be ready to debate. Great senators of the past stood up for ideas, not mere partisanship. Today, presidential hopefuls speechify to an empty chamber, blast fundraising emails during performative hearings and yell all day—to what end? To go on cable and yell anew all night.

The good news is that the American people are bored by this and there's a huge majority market for something better. Twitter isn't real life, and cable television doesn't represent the public. The vast majority of Twitter traffic is driven by less than 2% of the public. According to Pew, less than 6% of Americans generate 99% of political tweets. The programs of Tucker Carlson, Lawrence O'Donnell and Anderson Cooper draw prime-time audiences that sound impressive until you realize that together they account for less than 2% of the public.

Here's more good news: Americans can and will break the outrage cycle by building institutions. The zealous central planners don't own America's future. This country belongs to the optimists, the innovators and the builders. The places where we'll figure out what comes next are churches, schools, businesses and neighborhood associations.

America can't do big things if we hate our neighbors. Americans have always done big stuff: winning world wars, walking on the moon, beating the Soviets. None of these would have been possible if tribalism and hatred of our neighbors had defined us. As we did with urbanization and industrialization in the 19th and 20th centuries, in the 21st century we have to build big. We must navigate technological disruption, relaunch a post-pandemic economy and win the tech race against the Chinese Communist Party. Political zealots can't do these things. Only pluralists can. Recovery is possible.

But if recovery is to come, here's what it will look like: Senators will have to acknowledge that a politicized echo chamber is unworthy of the world's greatest deliberative body. Citizens will have to see that recovery means resisting the temptation to reduce fellow Americans to caricatures of their political affiliations. Recovery requires investment in things that will outlast partisan preferences. We must steward the present age, and play our small but vital parts in the work of self-government.

This is what Americans have always done, and why people from all over the world still yearn to join this crazy, beautiful experiment in liberty. America was the best home freedom has ever had, and it still is. Let's build together anew.

*Mr. Sasse, a Republican, is a U.S. senator from Nebraska. He has been appointed president of the University of Florida.*

*Appeared in the January 3, 2023, print edition as 'America's True Divide: Pluralists vs. Zealots'.*