



## How Politics Brings Out the Worst in Us

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December 29, 2015

Have you seen [The Best of Enemies](#) ? It's a documentary about the famous 1968 debates between [William F. Buckley, Jr.](#) and [Gore Vidal](#). The whole thing culminates in a moment where — after heated exchange — Buckley, taking Vidal's bait, explodes,

Now listen, you queer, you stop calling me a crypto-Nazi or I'll sock you in ... And when you root for the soldiers of your own country to be brutally killed, you ... I'll sock you in the goddam face and you'll stay plastered.

And there it was. The dandies of the left and right reduced to ad hominem, almost coming to blows. Nielsen loved it. And politics as prime-time blood sport became an American pastime.

Ironically, the very next evening I watched [Chasing Tyson](#), a documentary following the career of Evander Holyfield, which culminates in the big fight where Tyson bites Holyfield's ear. Twice.

Two nights in a row. Two documentaries, with two men squaring off. Each ends in someone spitting blood and probably regretting it. For Tyson and Holyfield, the wounds have all healed. They each moved on. They forgave. And each respects what the other was able to achieve in his career. But Buckley and Vidal died with the poison of personal and political animus still in their spleens.

This is happening to all of us.

As the political parade passes, the spectacle plays itself out on television and social media. Those who gather choose their sides of the avenue. In so choosing, they self-segregate. Tribal affiliations are on display. It's a natural human tendency, with deep roots in our evolutionary past.

According to Sharon Begley, writing about the Kurzban-Cosmides-Tooby jersey experiment in which team colors seem to overcome racial biases,

[Kurzban's] basketball-jersey experiment and others that have confirmed its results suggest that humans do have brain circuits for classifying people — but according to whether they are likely to be an ally or an enemy.

Politics brings out the worst in us by tapping into those tribal tendencies. Sure, trading barbs is better than trading bullets. We all know really nice people who participate in stinging or acrimonious exchanges online. Maybe we do it ourselves.

Here's a nice headline you might have shared: "5 Scientific Studies That Prove Republicans Are Stupid."

Or how about: "Yes, Liberalism is a Mental Disorder."

Here we have someone calling hundreds of millions of people stupid or crazy. Never mind that the country can't be so easily divided into two teams. It's a two party system. So in that good old democratic operating system (DOS) you have two choices of app, which means two choices of tribe.

I wondered if anybody else ever saw things like I do, from this lonely distance. I found [this](#) from the Cato Institute's Trevor Burrus:

Like any other game, the rules create the attitudes and strategies of the players. Throw two brothers into the Colosseum for a gladiatorial fight to the death, and brotherly sentiment will quickly evaporate. Throw siblings, neighbors, or friends into a political world that increasingly controls our deepest values, and love and care are quickly traded for resentment.

But it gets even worse. The first-past-the-post rules of our democratic politics turn a continuum of possibilities into binary choices and thus imposes black-and-white thinking onto a world made mostly of grays. Teams (politicians), cheerleaders (pundits) and fans (voters) galvanize around an artificially schismatic world view.

And then our biases take over. Now that we've invented a problem — "which group of 50 percent +1 will control education for everyone?" — imposed a binary solution — "we will teach either creation or evolution" — and invented teams to rally around those solutions — "are you a science denier or a science supporter?" — our tribal and self-serving brains go to work assuring us that we are on the side of righteousness and truth.

The shrillest and most dogmatic pundits and politicians become the most popular, feeding our sense of righteousness like southern Baptist preachers.

This could have been yet another of those articles which end with a call for reasoned discourse or more tolerance. Plenty of those articles have been written, and they don't do much good. Our tribal brain burns hotter than any intellectual plea for tolerance.

Instead, I just want to point out what's really going on: Politics sucks and democracy is overrated.

Politics — especially elections — creates a system that brings out the worst in people. It poisons relationships. It pulls us in as spectators who stand agog at a completely inauthentic show of national politics (over which we have virtually no power). We end up mostly ignoring the local issues over which we could have considerably more influence. As a consequence, an entire nation falls under a particular kind of spell.

As Jeffrey Tucker writes,

We are encouraged to believe that we are running the system. So we flatter ourselves that our opinions matter. After all, it is we the voters who are in charge of building the regime under which we live. But look deeper and you discover a truth that is both terrifying and glorious: the building of the great society can't be outsourced. It is up to you and me.

The only people to whom our opinions matter are the pollsters with their robocalls and their wet index fingers held aloft, and the media who hold up mirrors so distorted we can barely recognize ourselves.

People are different. They are going to have differences of opinions, they'll hold different values and run in different circles. But we expect that our opinions, values and circles should extend to a nation of 350 million people; by brute force if necessary. And until they do we'll just get on Facebook and sock them in the face until they stay plastered.

On Election Day, the team with the red jerseys will pull on their side of the rope. The team with the blue jerseys will pull on their side of the rope. In the end, both will end up the mud — because they've been standing in it all along.