

'Tis the Season for Politics to Make Us Worse

Minimal government has virtues beyond lower debt, less crowded prisons, and less militarized police. It might even save your family.

[Trevor Burrus](#) | December 25, 2014

Politics makes us worse—and at no time more so than around the holidays.

“If I have to listen to my crazy Tea Party uncle say one more thing about Michael Brown and Ferguson, I’m going to flip over the dinner table and retreat to my childhood room to look at old issues of *Seventeen*.”

“What are these liberal universities doing to our son?!? I’m not sure we should let him go back there.”

“When did you get so angry at the world, Mom and Dad? Is there something that isn’t Obama’s fault?!?”

Welcome to an American holiday tradition. Apple pie now comes with a side of political yelling, especially after a few glasses of eggnog.

The problem, of course, is that “they” don’t get it. How could they? Mom and Dad’s brains might as well be directly hooked to Fox News like the humans in the *Matrix*. The children’s “progressive” universities are as hermetically sealed off from reality as North Korea. And don’t even get me started on Uncle Tim, whose rural worldview is a strange mixture of a fear of black helicopters and a demand for increased farm subsidies.

How can you be expected to live in the same state, let alone country, with people who vote for fascism while you are voting for freedom? When they live in a fake world created by a self-serving news media and you live in reality? It’s probably best if we just double spike the eggnog and watch *A Christmas Story* for the third time.

But it’s not “their” fault; it’s politics’ fault—specifically, the politicization of more and more important and irreconcilable values. America is a deeply divided nation of clashing values partially because politics has made us this way. No matter what side of the political spectrum you’re on, it’s time to stop hating the players and start hating the game.

It was a nice, progressive, like-minded neighborhood until they moved in. With their “Jesus is the reason for the season” sign and their “Palin in 2016” bumper sticker, they stuck out like Bears fans at Lambeau Field. Then they started showing up at school board meetings and pushing for curriculum changes. Less environmentalism, more Founding Fathers. And others joined them, perhaps having been too scared to speak out before. Now there’s an ongoing political fight over curriculum standards and two different yearly block parties, one red and one blue. Friends are now enemies, children are not allowed to play together. But why did they have to come in and try to control the education of your children in the first place?

The answer, of course, is because politics controls education, and as long as that’s true, then it really can’t be any other way. The education of future generations is too important. Rather than give control over education to individual parents via school choice, we’ve given control to those who can galvanize 50 percent +1 of the vote. And since the outcomes are zero sum—what the winning side wins the other side loses—then the stakes are even higher. So people fight, not because they want to, but because they have to.

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 turns 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 is your brain on politics, and these are the people that an overly politicized world creates. And it’s inevitable if politics continues to take over more of our deepest, most divergent values.

Classical liberal and libertarian principles are about providing an operating system for free and diverse people to thrive cooperatively rather than combatively, creating a *Minecraft* for human ingenuity and flourishing rather than a *Call of Duty* fight to the death. Limiting the scope of political decision-making creates a type of mutual disarmament—“I won’t try to control your education or health care if you don’t try to control mine.”

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