

## PARTISAN IDENTIFICATION

# Hey, Progressives and Conservatives: You're Stuck With Each Other

So long as anything resembling legitimate elections continue to be held, no political coalition will gain a permanent lock on the future.

J.D. TUCCILLE | 7.10.2018 12:00 AM

Ah, modern not-so liberal democracy, in which one taunts political enemies with vows of total destruction.

“Hey Far Right: Gonna beat you,” trolled progressive Hollywood powerhouse Joss Whedon, in the lead up to Independence Day. “Not gonna start a war, not gonna shoot you, run you over, threaten your kids. Gonna beat you with passionate compassion. With journalism, activism, the Law. With v o t e s. Your rage is fear. Our rage is love. Our state is united. Happy 4th.”

That’s sort of the flipside of conservative pundit

Dennis Prager, speaking last February: “If we don’t defeat the left, America loses. I never call for unity because it’s not valid.”

Gonna beat you and defeat you—there’s a pretty lousy pop song in there. But what those words *don’t* offer is a recipe for maintaining a free and functioning democratic political system. Because, in the real world, wins and defeats are temporary, and the next turnabout is only a political cycle away. That is, we’re all going to be living with each other for a *long time* to come.

That Team Blue and Team Red fantasize about total victory over one another is no shocker in our current loathing-fueled political environment. *Pace* Whedon—who seems to have forgotten his insights with regard to his series *Firefly*: “nothing will change in the future: technology will advance, but we will still have the same political, moral, and ethical problems as today”—his side’s rage is not “love,” it’s just frigging rage, as is that of his counterparts.

“Democratic and Republican voters...despise each other, and to a degree that political scientists and pollsters say has



top image: Terray Sylvester / VWPics/Newscom; bottom image: Terray Sylvester / VWPics/Newscom

gotten significantly worse over the last 50 years,” Emily Badger and Niraj Chokshi wrote for *The New York Times* last summer.

Nothing has changed since then.

“Prior to the era of polarization, ingroup favoritism, that is, partisans’ enthusiasm for their party or candidate, was the driving force behind political participation,” write Shanto Iyengar and Masha Krupenkin of Stanford University in a recent *Advances in Political Psychology* article. “More recently, however, it is hostility toward the out-party that makes people more inclined to participate. The primal sense of ‘us against them’ makes partisans’ fixate on the goal of defeating and even humiliating the opposition at all costs.”

That certainly fits with the nasty public dialogue in political debates. It also explains further efforts to publicly confront political enemies (“opponents” is too soft a word to use in this environment)—to chase them from restaurants, delegitimize their media outlets, isolate their activist organizations, deny them access to banking services, etc. These aren’t efforts to win policy battles—they’re aimed at the total destruction of those with opposing views and affiliations.

But free societies don’t make any provision for beating and defeating opponents in any kind of permanent way. Republicans fantasize about a “hundred-year majority” and Democrats stroke themselves with talk of a “permanent progressive majority,” but it’s all back-patting self-delusion. Opinions and affiliations come and go.

For instance, the millennials who have a soft spot for Che paraphernalia (only 36 percent have a “very unfavorable” view of communism, according to the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation’s *Annual Report on U.S. Attitudes Toward Socialism*) are followed by Generation Z with stronger entrepreneurial spirit and less time for waving red flags (51 percent have a “very unfavorable” view of communism). Then again, given the perverse flow of history, a bizarrely high proportion of the following generation will probably think Benito Mussolini or the Ayatollah Khomeini was a swell guy.

So long as anything resembling legitimate elections continue to be held, no political coalition will gain a permanent lock on the future by gazing upon on any temporary preponderance of opinion as a crystal-ball read of political eternity. Instead, victories will come and go, and the winners and losers will have to continue to take turns transitioning from role to role.

This, I’ll point out, is something libertarians learned a long time ago. With our political victories usually one-off policy triumphs unrelated to electoral gains, we’ve long made our peace living alongside people with whom we disagree. We may not respect their opinions—hell, we may cheerfully refuse to abide by the laws and policies they implement during their turns in power—but we still eat alongside our opponents, do business with them, and say “hello” in the street. We make peace with people who harbor very different political affiliations because we have no reasonable alternative.

It’s time for Team Red and Team Blue to step up to that same level of maturity. Nothing but continuing and escalating conflict lies down the road they’ve chosen so far.

“If civility is out of style, where do we end up next,” Steven Greenhut asked in a [recent column](#). “I don’t believe a [civil] war is by any means likely, but I’m fearful of the kind of discourse we might find acceptable by the start of the next presidential election.”

If trends continue, that discourse is likely to get worse without resolving anything. Iyengar and Krupenkin point out that political conflict has a tendency to escalate because, unlike with social divides such as race or religion, there’s no taboo against stepping up the hostility. But in the U.S., politics increasingly correlate with racial, religious, and lifestyle divisions, and that aggravates the friction.

“Research in comparative politics has long demonstrated that when social cleavages overlap or reinforce each other (as in the case of race and partisanship in the United States or language and region in Catalonia), the resulting convergence of multiple identities creates an especially strong sense of group identity,” they write. “Under these conditions, dissatisfaction with political outcomes frequently results in mass movements to demand group autonomy, in some cases using violent forms of protest.”

Joss Whedon can fantasize all he wants about how he’s “gonna beat” the right. And Dennis Prager can plan to “defeat the left” to his heart’s content. But in a world in which political tides ebb and flow, the fact is that they’re both going to have to find a way to live with each other—and maybe even leave each other alone—unless they really look forward to a future of demands for “group autonomy” and “violent forms of protest.”

And yeah, that means the rest of us are stuck with them, too.

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**J.D. TUCCILLE** is a contributing editor at *Reason*.

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