

# The toxic zeitgeist of hyper-partisanship: A psychiatric perspective

**It is always judicious to avoid discussing religious or political issues because inevitably someone will be offended. As a lifetime member of the American Psychiatric Association, I adhere to its 'Goldwater Rule,' which proscribes the gratuitous diagnosis of any president absent of a formal face-to-face psychiatric evaluation. But it is perfectly permissible to express a psychiatric opinion about the contemporary national political scene.**

Frankly, the status of the political arena has become ugly. This should not be surprising, given that at its core, politics is an unquenchable thirst for power, and Machiavelli is its anointed godfather. The current political zeitgeist of the country is becoming downright grotesque and spiteful. Although fierce political rivalry is widely accepted as a tradition to achieve the national goals promulgated by each party, what we are witnessing today is a veritable blood sport fueled by "hyper-partisanship," where drawing blood, not promoting the public good, has become an undisguised intent.

The intensity of hyper-partisanship has engulfed the collective national psyche and is bordering on the

"religification" of politics. What used to be reasonable political views have been transformed into irrefutable articles of faith that do not lend themselves to rational debate or productive compromise. The metastasis of social media into our daily lives over the past decade is catalyzing the venomous crossfire across the political divide that used to be passionate and civil, but recently has degenerated into a raucous cacophony of hateful speech. Thoughtful debate of issues that promote the public good is becoming scarce. Instead of effectively defending the validity of their arguments, extremists focus on spewing accusations and ad hominem insults. It is worrisome that both fringe groups tenaciously uphold fixed and extreme political positions, the tenets of which can never be challenged.

Psychiatrically, those extreme ideological positions appear to be consistent with Jasper's criteria for a delusion (a belief with an unparalleled degree of subjective feeling of certainty that cannot be influenced by experience or arguments) or McHugh's definition of an overvalued idea, which resembles an egosyntonic obsession that is relished, amplified, and defended. Given that extremism is not just a "folie à deux" shared by 2 individuals but by many individuals, it may qualify as a "folie en masse."



**Henry A. Nasrallah, MD**  
Editor-in-Chief

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Having a political orientation is perfectly normal, a healthy evidence of absence of indolent apathy. However, the unconstrained fervor of political extremism can be as psychologically unhealthy as lethargic passivity. A significant segment of the population may see some merit on both sides of the gaping political chasm, but they are appalled by the intransigence of political extremism, which has become an impediment to the constructive compromise that is vital for progress in politics and in all human interactions.

Beliefs are a transcendent human trait. Homo sapiens represent the only animal species endowed by evolution with a large prefrontal cortex that enables each of its members to harbor a belief system. It prompts me to propose that Descartes' famous dictum "I think, therefore I am" be revised to "I believe, therefore I am human." But while many beliefs are reasonable and anchored in reality, irrational beliefs are odd and ambiguous, ranging from superstitions and overvalued ideas to conspiracy theories and cults, which I wrote about a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> In fact, epidemiologic research studies have confirmed a high prevalence of sub-threshold and pre-psychotic beliefs in the general population.<sup>2-5</sup> Thus, radical political partisanship falls on the extreme end of that continuum.

The zeitgeist generated by extreme partisanship is intellectually stunting and emotionally numbing. Psychiatrists

may wonder what consequences the intense anger and antipathy and scarcity of compromise between the opposing parties will have for the country's citizens. Although psychiatrists cannot repair the dysfunctional political fragmentation at the national level, we can help patients who may be negatively affected by the conflicts permeating the national scene when we read or watch the daily news.

Just as it is disturbing for children to watch their parents undermine each other by arguing ferociously and hurling insults, so it is for a populace aghast at how frenzied and intolerant their leaders and their extremist followers have become, failing to work together for the common good and adversely impacting the mental health zeitgeist.

**Henry A. Nasrallah, MD**  
Editor-in-Chief

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