

THE NATION; SOCIETY; America's State of Mind: Healthy and Divided

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Abstract:

Psychologically, the basic human need of maternal nurturance often conflicts with the need for autonomy. During adolescence, this conflict plays out: Children struggle to liberate themselves from their need for parental care by rebelling against parental authority and trying to assume personal responsibility for their lives. However, even after the adolescent has attained adulthood and become more self-reliant, the psychological need to be taken care of persists to varying degrees and remains in conflict with the need for separation and autonomy. In the political arena, Americans try to resolve this personal conflict by voting for the party that represents their strongest internal need.

Unfortunately, America cannot avoid this conflict. U.S. politics will inevitably be divisive because of the inherent unconscious conflict between the need to be taken care of, as represented by Democrats, and the desire for autonomy and control, embodied by Republicans. It is the dynamic struggle between these two competing psychological needs that serves as a major catalyst for human growth, both individually and politically. Ironically, the most representative election outcome provides the greatest opportunity to fulfill the psychological wishes of the American people, while also leaving them ripe for political deadlock.

Full Text:

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In this time of prosperity and with both political parties moving toward the center, how can we account for the fifty-fifty partisan standoff in America's body politic? Both houses of Congress are almost evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, and the presidential race has come down to fewer than 1,000 votes in Florida. One might think that as the two parties moved closer to the center, the chances for political deadlock would have dropped. But the opposite has occurred. Why?

Broadly speaking, in the American psyche, the Democratic Party's vision of government is roughly equivalent to a powerful, nurturing mother figure protecting and caring for the needy and downtrodden. By contrast, the Republican ideal embodies a strong father figure who rewards people for taking responsibility for their own lives and who supports independent initiative. The Democratic "breast-mother" government satisfies the basic human need to be taken care of by a loving, tolerant parent; the Republican father figure fulfills the need to break from parental domination, to have control over one's life and to pursue one's fortune.

Psychologically, the basic human need of maternal nurturance often conflicts with the need for autonomy. During adolescence, this conflict plays out: Children struggle to liberate themselves from their need for parental care by rebelling against parental authority and trying to assume personal responsibility for their lives. However, even after the adolescent has attained adulthood and become more self-reliant, the psychological need to be taken care of persists to varying degrees and remains in conflict with the need for separation and autonomy. In the political arena, Americans try to resolve this personal conflict by voting for the party that represents their strongest internal need.

Americans who have traditionally been more in need of help or care--women, the working class, the aged, the disabled, immigrants, certain racial and religious minorities, gays, etc.--and Americans who support them are more likely to vote Democratic. For these voters, liberal means the generosity of a nurturing governing structure. In contrast, they view Republicans as uncaring, hardhearted and greedy, a party of the rich and powerful demanding that government support their aggressive, self-serving (often entrepreneurial) needs.

For liberal Democrats, conservative is often equated with depriving the hungry and poor of government support through tax dodges, paying employees the lowest wages and benefits they can get away with, exploiting "Mother Earth" for profit and risking gun violence for the "macho" preference to hunt. They view the Republican stance against abortion as a willingness to ruin a woman's life in favor of the right of a fetus to live, again supporting the vital interest of the "child" against a "murderous" maternal authority.

In contrast, Americans who live according to an ethic of self-reliance and subscribe to an individual's right to control his own life, money and property with minimal interference are more likely to vote for a paternal Republican government. For these voters, government represents a powerful, controlling parental figure, a necessary evil that potentially threatens individual autonomy by "stealing" earned money through excessive taxes. The ideal Republican governance does not spoil or infantilize the people with nurturing, protective handouts but requires them to be responsible for themselves and supports independent initiative through tax breaks.

If Democrats and Republicans signify, respectively, the human need to be taken care of versus the need for autonomy and control, then the fifty-fifty split in campaign 2000 suggests that both basic psychological needs are exceptionally well represented in the American body politic. In other words, the American psyche is maximally healthy. Yet, as a result of this desirable balance, the political process seems deadlocked.

Will this continue, and is this bad or good for America? The current psychological stability of the country, perhaps more than at any other time, gives each party's politicians the choice of moving forward or remaining paralyzed. A fifty-fifty split

means that the only way for each party to fulfill its political agenda is to compromise with the needs of the other. Ideally, this would lead to more balanced political programs and great psychological satisfaction for the American people.

But government might also remain stalemated by partisan politics. In other words, elected politicians might self-destructively choose not to compromise. This would frustrate the American people, having made the best psychological selection for themselves but electing politicians unwilling to make concessions necessary to fulfill their needs.

Unfortunately, America cannot avoid this conflict. U.S. politics will inevitably be divisive because of the inherent unconscious conflict between the need to be taken care of, as represented by Democrats, and the desire for autonomy and control, embodied by Republicans. It is the dynamic struggle between these two competing psychological needs that serves as a major catalyst for human growth, both individually and politically. Ironically, the most representative election outcome provides the greatest opportunity to fulfill the psychological wishes of the American people, while also leaving them ripe for political deadlock.

Credit: Peter Wolson is a psychoanalyst and past president of the Los Angeles Institute and Society for Psychoanalytic Studies