

Social Issues

Civic Virtues and the Healing of Partisan Divides

In a time when many are drawing a line between communities and ideologies, the best line to draw is one that goes right through every human heart—a line that leads to five essential civic virtues.

By Robert A. Boisture | Jul. 12, 2018

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Over the past several decades, deeply entrenched forces have brought ever-greater polarization, toxicity, and dysfunction into America's civic life. Loud and angry voices have urged us to embrace a politics of anger, division, and fear—and too many of us have obliged. Meanwhile, our country's two major parties have moved ever further apart.

As a result, we are losing both the solidarity and the shared moral vision we need to maintain a strong and healthy free society. The prognosis for our democracy is not good.

If we are to arrest and ultimately reverse this decline, civil society leaders and organizations must first recognize that civil society, like every other major sector of American life, has contributed in important ways to this polarizing dynamic. Too many of us and our organizations have sorted ourselves out along ideological lines, live and work within ideological bubbles, and galvanize our supporters by demonizing those on the other side.



Civil Society for the 21st Century

(https://ssir.org/civil_society) for This article series, presented in partnership with **Independent Sector** (<https://independentsector.org/>), explores important issues of civil society in the 21st century: its origins and evolution, its boundaries and blind spots, its values and variety, its obstacles and opportunities.

However effective these behaviors have been in building grassroots support for our respective causes, over the long term, they lock us into what can best be described as a partisan death spiral. As our recent history makes clear, the thought that either conservatives or liberals, Democrats or Republicans, will gain and hold power long enough to enact and sustain our vision of America is a dangerous illusion.

The much bleaker reality is that as soon as one political party gains power, the other party's top priority becomes ensuring its defeat. And when, inevitably, the party in power fails to deliver rapid progress on deeply embedded problems, the pendulum swings back to a divided government or to the other party's control.

The resulting threat to our democracy is neither speculative nor very far down the road. For example, if government remains deadlocked on how to fix the federal budget's long-term, structural imbalance, Social Security, Medicare, and other entitlement programs—along with interest on our rapidly growing national debt—will consume 100 percent of federal revenues by the early- to mid-2030s. This will leave nothing for either discretionary domestic spending or national security. The longer we defer action to fix this problem, the more wrenching the retrenchment will be.

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While both parties have plans that could put us back on a sustainable fiscal path, neither has a realistic prospect of enacting and sustaining its plan. Likewise, this same political gridlock is preventing us from addressing a growing list of other urgent national challenges. The only sustainable way forward is bipartisan compromise, but if we continue to become more polarized, this compromise will become ever harder to achieve.

What, then, are we to do?

I believe we must begin by recognizing that political polarization is fundamentally a heart-level challenge.

We must acknowledge that too many of us have closed and hardened our hearts toward those who stand on “the other side”; that too often we engage them not as fellow citizens who deserve respect

and solidarity, but rather as hostile strangers to be met with suspicion and fear; and that in this process of retreating into our tribal bunkers, we have lost any sense of a shared moral vision of what America ought to be.

We must courageously step up to both dimensions of this spiritual and moral challenge—the challenge of opening our hearts in love to all of our fellow Americans and the challenge of coming together to create a shared moral vision for America in the 21st century.

We would do well to begin by reflecting on the hard-won wisdom of Soviet dissident and political prisoner Alexander Solzhenitsyn, as expressed in *Gulag Archipelago*, his classic account of the Soviet prison camp system:

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart ... Since then, I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the evil inside a human being ... It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.

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Regardless of our personal faith or spiritual path, or even if we do not claim one, we must commit to the hard and never-ending inner work of constricting evil and profoundly opening our hearts in love. As Solzhenitsyn notes, inspiring and supporting this work has been the central goal of all of faith traditions. Over the centuries, each has developed spiritual disciplines and practices to guide this journey, as well as spiritual communities to support it. Today, these are priceless resources for us all.

How can we gauge our progress on this journey?

The test must be whether our actions as citizens embody the core civic virtues essential to a free society.

1. Do we recognize the sacred dignity and worth of every person?

2. Do we bring to civic life a wholehearted commitment to the greater good?
3. Do we admit that we are fallible and must therefore be open to having those with whom we disagree change our minds?
4. Do we embrace principled compromise as an essential civic virtue?
5. Do we recognize that we are all in this together and that in the long run, none of us can flourish unless all of us flourish?

Only when a critical mass of us brings these essential civic virtues to our common life will we be able to come together to take on the second challenge of renewing our democracy—the challenge of creating a shared moral vision and a new social contract for America in the 21st century.

Again, faith traditions have much to offer. Each in its own way has endeavored to envision what society would look like if its touchstones were the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of the natural world.

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[Subscribe](#) It is particularly thought-provoking that while some of the core principles underlying these spiritually grounded perspectives align with a liberal ideology, others align with a conservative one. Perhaps thoughtfully engaging these perspectives could help us all step outside our ideological boxes to engage in both morally grounded self-reflection and a shared search for common ground.

All of this has profound implications for civil society leaders and organizations. For a great many Americans, participation in civil society organizations is the primary place where our approach to citizenship forms—where we learn, or fail to learn, the essential civic virtues. Further, it is primarily within civil society that we will come together as a nation, or fail to come together, to create a shared moral vision for America.

America will remain a flourishing, free society only if civil society proves that it is up to these two daunting tasks. May we all hope and pray that it will.



Robert A. Boisture is the president of the [John E. Fetzer Institute](#). The Institute's mission is to help build the spiritual foundation for a loving world.

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