

Political disagreements are not holy wars

When pundits describe politics in America, they often use the word “polarized,” which means people are divided into two opposing groups with very different views. My recent experiences painted a clear picture of what the pundits are talking about. While waiting for a table at a restaurant, my wife and I had to listen to a guy who was loudly claiming that anyone who voted for Obama was anti-American. He seemed to have many people agreeing with him. In contrast, I also regularly run into people who claim that anyone who voted for Trump is an idiot. Taken together, my aforementioned encounters suggest that many people are starting to consider politics as if it was a holy war. Their side is righteous, and the other side is evil or inept.

Given our country’s rampant political polarization, it is worth remembering how our representative democracy is meant to work. Our democracy is set up so that when the Republican political party is in power, it can make decisions that the Democrats do not agree with. The Democrats go along with the Republicans’ decisions because one day the Democrats will be in power and the Republicans will go along with the Democrats’ policies.

In a parliamentary democracy, like the United Kingdom has, the government’s policies can drastically change when a different party comes to power. For

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instance, when the Conservative party lost an election in 2024, the winning Labor party was able to start implementing drastically different policies. These wide swings in policy occur in the UK because its executive (the prime minister) is the leader of the legislative branch (the House of Commons). Also, the UK’s judiciary has much less ability to strike down laws than the judiciary does in the United States.

In fact, the United States set up its system so there was a lot that the President could not do. We have two chambers in the legislative branch that might oppose the President’s will. We also have a constitution (which the UK does not have), and the Supreme Court can strike down any law or executive order that is unconstitutional. These roadblocks, which prevent the President from always getting his way, help protect members of the other party from having to suffer through policies they strongly oppose.

Our social contract then, is that we will put up with laws that we do not agree with because we know members of the other political party will do the same. We are especially willing to agree to this arrangement when our preferred party is not in power because our system places so

many roadblocks in front of a president trying to implement the policies that he likes but that we don’t.

An example of this protection recently played out. Donald Trump used executive orders to implement wide-ranging tariffs. The Supreme Court ruled that his orders were illegal. Normally, when faced with such a decision, a President would stop the unconstitutional policy. Unfortunately, Donald Trump reinstated tariffs. He used a pretext that a law allows him to impose temporary tariffs if there is a balance of payments imbalance. This tariff, if it goes to the court, will be found to be an illegal use of his power. The reason is that while there is a trade imbalance, there is not a balance of payments imbalance.

Donald Trump’s insistence on replacing one illegal tariff with another is worrisome. Our agreement among US citizens – to accept the decisions of a government that we do not agree with – is based on the belief that the President will operate within the constraints that our constitution and our laws provide. Our system does not work when our leaders think that they are involved in a holy war that excuses them from following the rules. The rules are what binds our system together and has allowed it to last for over 235 years.

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