

Remedying Polarization with Constitutionalism

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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To secure the rights that inhere in all persons, American constitutional government weaves together competing principles and promotes compromise among rival interests even as it presupposes a citizenry disposed to tolerate a variety of opinions. Consequently, the polarization that is agitating our nation strikes at the heart of the country's political system. And it enervates the moral sensibility that undergirds the Constitution. Understanding and arresting polarization is therefore a vital national interest.

Although the polarization of contemporary American politics has been widely observed and repeatedly lamented, the reality is worse than is commonly supposed. The bitter recriminations routinely hurled across party lines are only the most conspicuous evidence of the rigidity and one-sidedness that plagues our politics.

Polarization also takes its toll within the parties. The left has tended to purge dissent, which unifies the partisans around a crusading progressivism. The right is given to internecine conflict, which has the benefit of bringing out into the open conflicting perspectives.

The public debate between U.S. Sen. Josh Hawley, a Missouri Republican, and Washington Post columnist George Will is of special interest because each champions an element central to American constitutional government. At stake for the senator stressing community and for the columnist defending individual liberty is the soul of the conservative movement. In fact, both community and liberty are essential components of the conservative soul, because each is incomplete without the other and constitutional government presupposes both.

"We live in a troubled age," Hawley stated in a November speech at the American Principles Project Foundation 2019 gala. "Discontent is the theme of our politics, the preoccupation of our popular culture. It is the very air we breathe." We are "so troubled in spirit, so rent by division, so anxious and uncertain" because "we are living in a new age of inequality." In his telling, the problem is worsening: "The divide between the wealthy and working Americans is wide, and growing wider," especially "between Americans with a high school degree and those who have four-year college degrees or more."

This "new oligarchy of wealth and education," Hawley maintains, comprises many of "the leaders of this country's government, its press, its corporations and most of its popular culture." The inequality it embodies, however, is only the beginning of the new oligarchy's sins.

Hawley traces the nation's "staggering record of deaths of despair" -- that is, "deaths from suicide, from alcohol, from drug overdoses" -- to a pernicious conception of freedom promulgated by the wealthy and educated. Their destructive ideas about radical individualism, he asserts, have desiccated communities. This, in turn, has precipitated "an epidemic of personal loneliness and isolation."

In Hawley's view, American elites subscribe to a "Promethean ideal" of freedom according to which "the individual self exists apart from all social ties and relations." This "Promethean self creates her own reality, her own truth" and "forges her own meaning." For such disengaged and unattached selves, "the only time community is truly worthwhile is when it is freely chosen." The elites' conception of freedom, however, is no longer itself subject to free choice: "This Promethean idea has by now become so thoroughly ingrained in American culture, so ubiquitous in our public life, it's impossible to escape it."

The Promethean self in America, by Hawley's account, has spawned a Promethean morality, Promethean civil society, Promethean economics, and Promethean politics. The Promethean self gives the individual the last word on what is good and just. It subordinates faith, family, and neighborhood to individual whim and will. It reduces economic life to the quest for monetary gain and material satisfaction. And it purges from politics concern for the public interest.

Hawley recognizes that the rebuilding of community and the reclaiming of liberty must go hand in hand. That's because community in America long rested on "the deep conviction that every life matters" and on the fundamental belief "that every person is uniquely called and uniquely gifted." But he does not seem to appreciate the extent to which the individualism that he reviles and the capitalism that he excoriates are bound up with the older conception of liberty to which he makes passing reference.

In a column earlier this month, George Will takes Hawley to task for equating freedom in America with the Promethean ideal. "Actually, the intellectual pedigree of America's public philosophy traces to John Locke, who rejected Thomas Hobbes's view that man is naturally 'solitary,'" writes Will. "Locke stressed that limited government is possible and desirable because human beings' natural sociability enables them to thrive together without ceding vast power to government."

Will also faults Hawley for overlooking the complex causes of the mounting deaths in America from suicide, alcohol, and drugs and instead laying the blame at capitalism's feet. For his part, Will emphasizes that capitalism has lifted hundreds of millions across the globe out of poverty and has fostered "innovation in goods and services" that has raised the standard of living of middle classes around the world.

Although Hawley never explains just what is entailed by his summons to "forge in this century a new politics of family and neighborhood -- a new politics of love and belonging -- a new politics of home," Will fears that those lofty sentiments threaten limited government by providing an invitation to even larger state intrusion into Americans' private lives. The senator's scorn for capitalism, Will adds, opens the door to an "extravagant faith" in the state that is inimical to a

constitution designed to preserve liberty by checking and balancing the exercise of government power.

Hawley did not take these strictures as constructive criticism. In a prompt reply in *The Federalist*, he complains that the old George Will whom he admired and who taught him to appreciate the likes of Aristotle, Madison, Burke, and Tocqueville is nowhere to be found in the writings of the new George Will. Espousing “a cartoon version of libertarianism,” the new Will denigrates community, sneers at the uneducated, and is indifferent to the poor, Hawley asserted.

Will no longer understands, Hawley wrote, “that individual freedom is formed by culture and community, and you have to work to defend both.”

Actually, it is frivolous for Hawley to suggest that Will has lost sight of ideas that he has illuminated in countless columns and several books over the course of more than four decades. There is a serious debate to be had between Hawley and Will and it revolves around the role of government in preserving civil society. If Will stresses individual liberty and free markets these days, it is not for failure to grasp the vital role of culture and community -- or, for that matter, the costs of capitalism in an era of globalization -- but owing to an appreciation that government overreach presents a major threat to civil society’s vigor and integrity.

Hawley’s most serious error consists in claiming, without offering the slightest evidence, that the wealthy and educated in the United States subscribe to a Promethean conception of freedom that decisively shapes public life. He’s recycling a conservative complaint from the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s directed against the then-regnant relativism, epitomized by the popular exhortations to do your own thing and to let it all hang out. What may have been true of many members of the Sixties generation, however, does not well describe the preponderance of their children and grandchildren.

Little about today’s wealthy and educated corresponds to the pretensions of the Promethean self. They are far from celebrating the creative will, the boundlessness of desire, and the imperatives of self-making. They are much more likely to be sanctimonious, censorious, and dogmatic, convinced that there is one true way to live well which they embody and which they have every right to enforce on the nation as a whole.

Accordingly, it is not inequality but rather this arrogance -- systematically instilled by our K-12 schools, aggressively reinforced by our colleges and universities, and perpetuated by much of the elite media and entertainment industry -- and the disdain for the less wealthy and educated to which it gives expression that is likely a leading source of the toxic polarization of our politics.

Such is the potency of this arrogance that contemporary polarization blinds even those on the same side to the complex and essential connections between concepts crucial to constitutional government. To curb polarization, we must recover the toleration that undergirds American constitutional government and revive appreciation of the balancing of competing principles and rival interests that the Constitution was designed to achieve.

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