

Guest Column: How to be an anti-partisan

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When people look at political questions through a partisan lens they apply their own personal gloss to the world. They reflexively interpret events in favor of their own tribe and against the other side. This distorts empirical reality, which is completely independent from such subjective mental processing.

The main problem with partisan thinking is that it's inaccurate, wrong, mistaken—irrespective of what tribe it comes from. It leads to gross stupidities across the political continuum, like believing Barack Obama was born in Kenya or Donald Trump colluded with Vladimir Putin to hack into the Democratic National Committee's email servers.

A partisan lens is counterproductive if your goal is to accurately interpret the world. If your political tribe is empirically right about something, then the lens is superfluous. If your tribe is empirically wrong, then the lens is distortive.

Comedian Stephen Colbert may be right about some things (and quite funny to boot), but he was very wrong when he famously said that, "Reality has a well-known liberal bias." It doesn't. The empirical world is not liberal or conservative. Sometimes the right answer happens to be liberal; sometimes it happens to be conservative; and sometimes it has no home on either side of the rigid ideological divide. The world unfolds according to the immutable laws of nature and science, not the transient perceptions of politics. Leaves don't rustle in the wind differently depending on which party controls the presidency. Waves don't pound the shore

harder when it's an election year. Economic cycles don't suddenly reverse if the minority gains a majority in the legislature. And political policies, events, and scandals don't conform to the knee-jerk narratives of distant observers.

While politicians and political operatives have incentives to distort the truth, the citizen's goal should be straightforward: to strive to make sense of the world accurately. The alternative is to be wrong; and why would that be better?

The comforts of partisanship make conforming to one's group satisfying and protective. But it's far better to be accurate and independent than wrong and partisan. Thinking that Obama was constitutionally ineligible to be president or that Trump and Putin were scheming in cyberspace was radically at odds with the available evidence. And those who didn't buy into these delusions were far better off for their independence. As Frederick Douglas said, "I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and to incur my own abhorrence."

Being an anti-partisan is the way to go. Indeed, partisan misjudgment is more than merely an interesting psychological topic or stimulating academic question. Imposing on the world an ideology ridden with mistaken conclusions never goes well—especially in a representative democracy where public opinion often dictates public policy. A government's intellectual premises must be sound for it to work well. And partisanship in America has contributed to numerous significant public-policy errors and failures.

Just look at the 2024 presidential campaign: A guy who tried to overthrow a presidential election is about to square off with a guy who has trouble completing a sentence longer than a few words.

Is this really the best we can do in the competition to see who will have America's top job? Of course not. But because of the power of partisanship each side thinks their guy really is the right man to be president. This reflects how American politics is getting even more partisan as social-media echo chambers continue to turbo-charge our two-party political system. It's going to be a wild eight months till November. And then, either way, a tumultuous four years from there.

William Cooper is the author of *How America Works ... And Why It Doesn't*.