

# What Is the Cause of our Angry Politics?

Everyone agrees that there is something different about today's angry politics. The ordinary issues that have shaped the political debate for years have largely remained the same. The economy is still in bad shape, terrorism remains a top concern and the deficit is still growing as fast as ever.

The mood of the nation, however, has undergone a great shift. People are angry. They are not angry *about something*, but rather angry *at someone*. Digging a bit deeper, one finds that, more often than not, people are venting their rage not at any particular individual, but rather a class, institution or grouping of people. Targets include incumbents, corrupt politicians, bureaucrats, lobbyists, politically correct academics, clergy, or just the plain "establishment"—whatever that might mean. This unfocused shotgun approach holds that we need to throw the whole lot out and start over again to effect real change.

The causes of this widespread discontent are likewise unfocused. There are authentic, rational reasons for this discontent, but it usually manifests itself more through feelings than facts. There is a general (and often legitimate) feeling of betrayal on the part of governing institutions that have failed to be responsive to an assortment of conflicting concerns. People sense that generally things are stagnated and not moving forward. Many more simply feel left behind.

The result is a very real divorce between the present policies shaping the nation and what the nation actually needs and wants. And like every divorce, it is very messy.

Like a broken marriage, the missing element is trust. Public confidence in major institutions has plummeted over the past

four decades with Congress in the basement with a less than ten percent approval rating. The media, academia, corporations and religious groups do not fare much better. Anti-institutional candidates are all the rage and win by raging against anyone even remotely connected with "the system."

The erosion of this public trust has been building for decades, but only now are the political implications becoming evident. The giant edifice of American society—so apparently powerful and resilient—is only as strong as the patchwork of buttresses, struts and beams that hold it up. In this case, the patchwork consists of those personal relationships built on trust that bind people together for virtuous life in common. These ties can be found in families, communities and other intermediary associations that hold the nation together in trust. Above all, these bonds are forged when people love their neighbors as themselves *for the love of God*, in the practice of Christian charity.

It is no secret that the strength of these social ties has dramatically weakened over the years. These important lines of communication in our society are being severed from top to bottom. The respect, affection, and courtesy flowing from these social ties no longer facilitate the organic circulation and flow of fresh ideas and vitality throughout society. Intermediary groups, like parishes and local communities, are fading away together with the feeling of security they once gave. People can no longer identify with the surviving institutions that are usually huge and bureaucratic. Hence comes the very real sensation of stagnation and alienation that is so much a part of angry politics.

Modernity does little to discourage this disaggregation or the anger. In the name of a misplaced diversity without unity, people go about the exhausting task of defining their identity, sexuality, and brand without concern for society or the common good. Those who oppose this diversity are angrily labeled "bigoted" or "intolerant."

That is why we are now seeing the frenzied disintegration of a society where all go their own way. People harden in their own positions, and the world becomes, in the words of Alasdair MacIntyre, “a meeting place for individual wills, each with its own set of attitudes and preferences and who understand that world solely as an arena for the achievement of their own satisfaction.”

The result is a political climate of mistrust that leads to a polarization that is actually a shattering of the country into thousands of little poles that make angry politics happen. This is only logical since broken trust tends to beget ever more angry distrust.

That is not to say anger cannot have a constructive role in politics. However, it should be focused and principled. It should not lead to indiscriminate rage against *all* authority and institutions, and the idea that no one can be trusted save oneself. Society becomes impossible if anger leads to the conclusion that each man should become his own authority and his own law.

If we are to return to order, there will need to be those who rise above self-interest and truly grieve for the nation. Such representative figures have always appeared in times of crisis to unite, never shatter, the nation. They will need to reforge those social bonds and rebuild society and its structures. They will need to rally the nation around those permanent virtues of courage, duty, courtesy, justice, and charity that encourage moderation and builds strong social bonds. Trust must be restored, and at the very root, beginning with an immense trust in God.

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