

# The charitable view in partisan politics

By **Joshua Kassner**

---

SHARE THIS



The secret to taking the high road in politics: a charitable view.

---

APRIL 23, 2015, 2:33 PM

**A**s the 2016 **presidential campaign season** takes off, we are reminded that politics in the United States is trapped in a cycle of dysfunctional partisanship. And it's our fault. But — before we are caught up in the swirl of television ads, debates and robocalls — there is something we can do about it. Bear with me.

You might be asking, "How am I responsible?" Thomas Jefferson once claimed that the "government you elect is the government you deserve." As voters we have rewarded those who righteously offer meat-and-potatoes, partisan platitudes. We seek out intellectual echo-chambers and accuse those with whom we disagree of harboring evil intentions, calling them corrupt, incompetent, ignorant, opportunistic, unpatriotic or just insane. Conservatives accuse liberals of hating American values, and liberals accuse conservatives of hating the poor.

This **unreflective partisanship** and intellectual incest define the political landscape in which American politicians operate. As such, the intractable posturing and gridlock we condemn is a direct consequence of the political culture that we have, wittingly or not, constructed. So, despite our tendency to blame our politicians, responsibility lies with us.

But fear not, the upcoming election cycle provides an opportunity to redefine and reconstruct the basic tenor of our political culture. It's simple: Be charitable. Obviously, this is not about tithing or giving money. It's about how we understand one another, especially those with whom we disagree. It is a basic principle of philosophical discourse, and embracing it would fundamentally alter the nature of political dialogue in the United States.

Under the principle of charity, we presume that those who disagree with us have understandable reasons for believing what they do, and it does not inherently mean that they are irrational or evil. The principle of charity compels us to be humble and reflective about our own beliefs, and it makes sincere exchanges between those who disagree possible.

What would it mean to adopt the principle of charity? First, in conversations in person or online, being charitable requires that we try to understand the position of those with whom we disagree in the best light possible. Don't immediately dismiss others' thoughts because they're different from your own; they may even help you have a better and broader understanding about the issue at hand, and perhaps even empathy for those on the other side.

Second, the principle of charity provides a lens through which we view our politicians and the rhetoric they employ. When one politician claims that another is out to hurt the community or doesn't care about the country or is really only in it to benefit some "special interest" group, you should be skeptical and challenge such assertions. Ask for the evidence. Expect and demand that those who want your vote elevate the political conversation rather than pander to the lowest common denominators.

A charitable mindset also requires that we vote for those who recognize the value of thoughtfulness and intellectual humility. Reward the candidate who seeks to understand his or her opponent as well-meaning rather than wicked.

With all this talk about being charitable, I could be accused of being very uncharitable. Specifically, you might be thinking that I am being uncharitable to those who eschew the principle of charity.

So, what would be the charitable interpretation of those who use ad hominem **attacks and partisan rhetoric** to get elected? An uncharitable view might be that they are power-hungry people who are spiteful and small-minded. Alternatively, a more charitable view might interpret their behavior as a necessary means to what they perceive as a greater good. They must get elected. Their lack of charity is a reflection of our own.

In other words, if we want them to change, we have to lead the way.

*Joshua Kassner is an associate professor at the **University of Baltimore**. His email is [jkassner@ubalt.edu](mailto:jkassner@ubalt.edu).*