

A toxic and fractured political system can breed angst and PTSD

As psychiatrists know, many of our severely traumatized adult patients were victims of abuse during childhood. We routinely ask every new patient about physical, emotional, or sexual abuse when they were growing up because of the well-established, serious neurobiological and mental repercussions.^{1,2}

Perhaps one of the worst experiences for a child is to witness bitterly adversarial parents (their vital role models) who argue viciously, despise each other, and hurl insults (and even punches) at each other. Such a chronically and emotionally traumatic upbringing can haunt kids well into adulthood, disrupting their hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and triggering anxiety, depression, and even psychosis due to epigenetic changes that ultimately lead to abnormal brain development.³

It often feels that the governance of our country, or the national “political family,” is seriously fractured like a hopelessly dysfunctional family. Could that be negatively impacting the mental health of the citizenry? Having 2 antagonistic political parties expressing visceral hatred and undisguised contempt for each other 24/7 (thanks to the enabling era of cable TV, the internet, and social

media) has transformed each party’s fanatic followers from fellow citizens to ideological combatants. In this poisonous societal zeitgeist of bidirectional acrimony and mutual detestation, the opposing parties and their “intellectual militias” label each other as “extremists” or “radicals.” They become completely blind to any redeeming social value in the ideas or principles of their political opponents. They spend enormous time and energy on undermining each other instead of attending to the myriad vital issues involved in the governance of a massive and complex country.

Winston Churchill said, “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried.”⁴ The current toxic cloud of intense “hyper-partisanship” is emblematic of the dark Machiavellian side of democracy. But those who lament the current distorted version of democracy should contemplate living in a dictatorship or totalitarian regime, where a despot would execute any dissenter or invade and destroy an adjacent country at a whim.

Churchill made that statement in 1947. The internet, social media, and smartphones were science fiction back then. Those technological advances have added fuel to the political process and significantly stoked the flames of hyper-partisanship. It’s now democracy on steroids, where freedom of expression



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doi: 10.12788/cp.0393

The governance of our country is fractured like a dysfunctional family and could be negatively impacting the mental health of the citizenry

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Box 1

Is there toxic hyperpartisanship in the USA today? (generated by ChatGPT)

Yes, there is toxic hyperpartisanship in the United States today. Political polarization has been on the rise for several decades, and in recent years, it has become increasingly toxic and divisive. This toxic hyperpartisanship has contributed to a breakdown in civil discourse and a lack of cooperation and compromise in government.

The toxic hyperpartisanship is evident in many aspects of American society, including politics, media, and social media. Political leaders often engage in divisive rhetoric and focus on winning at all costs, rather than working towards solutions that benefit the country as a whole. Media outlets often present news in a partisan manner, further fueling political polarization.

Social media platforms have also played a role in exacerbating toxic hyperpartisanship by allowing the spread of misinformation and creating echo chambers where people are only exposed to like-minded viewpoints.

The consequences of toxic hyperpartisanship are significant, as it can hinder progress on important issues and erode trust in institutions and government. It also makes it difficult for people to engage in productive dialogue and find common ground, leading to a lack of cooperation and compromise.

It is important for individuals to be aware of the impact of toxic hyperpartisanship and work towards finding ways to bridge the political divide and engage in constructive dialogue.

goes to extremes, highlighting the warts and pitfalls of the democratic system. Political rivals can now communicate their ferocious disagreements to millions of their disciples instantaneously, triggering immediate rebuttals and counterattacks by their adversaries. This “virtual guerilla warfare” is mentally and emotionally exhausting to all involved, especially to the subset of neutral bystanders who are unaffiliated with either political party, which, due to the “religification” of politics, have become like secular religions.⁵ Chronic, unremitting, inescapable stress is a sure pathway for anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and even brain atrophy.

Optimists may point out that the United States has weathered and emerged stronger from many serious traumas, including the Civil War (with its lethal divisiveness), World War I, the deadly 1918 influenza pandemic, the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, World War II, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Watergate political scandal, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the banking collapse and recession, and most recently the

COVID-19 pandemic, which brought society to a standstill and induced so much anxiety and uncertainty.

On the other hand, pessimists would insist those sequential crises left indelible scars that cumulatively altered the mindset of political rivals, predisposing them to extreme views of each other. Alienation inevitably leads to fanaticism. It's perplexing but fascinating how the fierce bidirectional missives of weaponized ideas can be as virulent and destructive as a traditional physical war. Perhaps in this era, the pen is mightier than the sword after all.

From a psychiatric perspective, the intransigent groupthink of political partisanship eerily resembles folie en masse, a psychiatric syndrome for which there is no established treatment. It has become a serious threat to our modern democracy. So I decided to ask the “know-it-all” artificial intelligence ChatGPT, whom I previously had “invited” to write a “guest editorial” about myths surrounding psychiatry,⁶ to answer 3 burning questions:

1. Is there toxic hyperpartisanship in the USA today? (**Box 1**)

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The intransigent
groupthink of political
partisanship eerily
resembles folie en
masse

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2. How can severe hyperpartisanship be corrected? (*Supplemental Box 1*, available on www.mdedge.com/psychiatry)

3. What can cause the collapse of a democracy? (*Supplemental Box 2*, available on www.mdedge.com/psychiatry).

Judge for yourself, but I believe the ChatGPT responses were spot-on.



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How can severe hyperpartisanship be corrected? (generated by ChatGPT)

Severe hyperpartisanship, characterized by intense and entrenched divisions between political parties, can be a challenging issue to address, but there are several steps that can be taken to work towards correcting it. Here are some potential approaches:

1. Promote civil discourse: Encourage respectful and constructive conversations between individuals with differing political views. This can be achieved through education programs, media campaigns, and initiatives to foster open dialogue.
2. Electoral reforms: Consider implementing electoral reforms that can reduce the influence of extreme partisanship. For example, ranked-choice voting or nonpartisan primaries may encourage candidates to appeal to a broader base of voters rather than just their party's base.
3. Campaign finance reform: Limit the influence of money in politics, as it can exacerbate hyperpartisanship by allowing wealthy donors to have undue influence over candidates and parties.
4. Independent redistricting: Ensure that electoral district boundaries are drawn in a fair and nonpartisan manner. Gerrymandering, the manipulation of district lines to favor one party, can contribute to hyperpartisanship by creating "safe" districts where extreme candidates are more likely to be elected.
5. Promote media literacy: Encourage media literacy education to help citizens critically evaluate information sources and avoid echo chambers. A well-informed electorate is less susceptible to extreme partisanship.
6. Encourage bipartisan collaboration: Highlight and support instances of successful bipartisan collaboration. Elected officials who work across the aisle can

serve as positive examples and encourage others to follow suit.

7. Address economic inequality: Tackling economic disparities can alleviate some of the underlying factors that contribute to polarization. When people feel economically secure, they may be more willing to seek common ground.
 8. Civics education: Improve civics education in schools to foster a deeper understanding of democratic values, the political process, and the importance of civic engagement.
 9. Leadership example: Encourage political leaders to model cooperation and compromise rather than relying on divisive rhetoric. Voters often take cues from their leaders' behavior.
 10. Promote third parties: Support and encourage the emergence of viable third-party candidates. A more diverse political landscape can provide alternatives to extreme partisanship.
 11. Focus on common ground: Identify and prioritize issues where there is potential for bipartisan consensus and progress. Building success on these issues can create momentum for further cooperation.
 12. Encourage grassroots activism: Support grassroots movements that seek to bridge divides and foster understanding between individuals and communities with different political perspectives.
- It's essential to recognize that addressing severe hyperpartisanship is a complex and long-term process that requires collective effort from citizens, political leaders, educators, and institutions. It won't be achieved overnight, but through sustained and committed actions, progress can be made toward a more collaborative and less divisive political climate.

Supplemental Box 2

What can cause the collapse of a democracy? (generated by ChatGPT)

The collapse of a democracy can be a complex and multifaceted process, influenced by various factors and circumstances. Some of the common causes that can lead to the erosion or breakdown of a democratic system include:

1. **Authoritarianism and power concentration:** When leaders or institutions become increasingly authoritarian, centralizing power and weakening checks and balances, it can undermine democratic principles.
2. **Corruption and lack of accountability:** Rampant corruption among political leaders and institutions can erode public trust in the democratic system, leading to disillusionment and disengagement.
3. **Economic instability:** Prolonged economic crises or severe inequality can lead to social unrest, increasing the appeal of populist or extremist movements that may challenge democratic norms.
4. **Weakening of rule of law:** If the rule of law is weakened, and there is a lack of respect for judicial independence and constitutional principles, democratic institutions can become vulnerable to manipulation.
5. **Erosion of civil liberties:** Suppression of freedom of speech, media, assembly, and association can limit citizens' ability to express their opinions and participate in the democratic process.

6. **Polarization and divisive politics:** Extreme political polarization and a breakdown of civil discourse can hinder cooperation and compromise essential for a functioning democracy.

7. **External interference:** Foreign intervention, propaganda, or cyberattacks can influence electoral processes and undermine democratic institutions.

8. **Rise of populism and nationalism:** Populist movements that challenge democratic norms, demonize minorities, or advocate for a strongman leadership can pose a threat to democracy.

9. **Demographic and social shifts:** Demographic changes and social tensions can exacerbate political divisions and weaken the fabric of democratic societies.

10. **Lack of civic education and participation:** A lack of civic education and low voter turnout can lead to reduced civic engagement and undermine the democratic process.

It is crucial to understand that no democracy is immune to these challenges, and the strength of a democratic system depends on the vigilance and engagement of its citizens, the integrity of its institutions, and the commitment to upholding democratic values. Safeguarding and strengthening democracy requires ongoing efforts to address these issues and protect the principles that underpin democratic governance.