

Opinion: I reject both parties' ideas of Americanism. And I'm not the only one.

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For more than two decades, I've tried to make sense of political currents in both parties, often to the consternation of readers on both sides. I've been called a corporatist and Republican apologist; more often, I'm called an elitist who pumps out Democratic talking points.

In all that time, I have not felt as utterly repulsed from the mainstream of both parties as I do right now. And I'm pretty sure I'm not alone.

Like most kids who grew up politically engaged in the Northeast, I started political life as a registered Democrat, casting my first presidential vote for Michael Dukakis. In my mid-20s, while a city desk reporter at the Boston Globe, I changed my registration to independent, and I've never gone back.

For many years, when I told curious politicians or readers that I was an independent, they would nod knowingly, as if we both understood this was a necessity of the job — a veneer covering my obviously leftist sensibilities.

In fact, I never thought party registration had anything to do with my credibility as a reporter. I chose to be an independent because, temperamentally and intellectually, that's how I'm wired.

I wasn't comfortable with the increasing tribalism of party politics. And once you've covered cops, courts and housing projects in cities such as Boston and New York, it's hard to maintain a belief that government has all the answers.

Through six presidential campaigns and counting, I have found much to disdain in both parties but also plenty to admire. I like politicians generally, and I've written positively about both Democrats and Republicans — [Barack Obama](#), [Mark R. Warner](#), [Chris Christie](#), [John Kasich](#) — who had the courage to rethink old orthodoxies.

I have never bought into the idea that journalists shouldn't vote — that refraining from the exercise of citizenship somehow made us any less biased. I've voted Democratic in most elections, if not always enthusiastically, and I've cast ballots for Republicans and third-party candidates, too.

All of which is to say that, like a growing number of Americans who eschew party affiliations, I leaned in one direction more often than not, but I wasn't a loyalist.

Lately, however, I find myself feeling not so much ambivalent about the parties as alienated. I'm confronted with two extreme interpretations of what it means to be American, and I emphatically reject them both.

It seems self-evident that the Republican Party — more a celebrity fan club than a political organization at this point — would, if left to its own devices, destroy the foundation of the republic. I never thought I'd write those words about any U.S. political party, but here we are.

It's not just that Donald Trump and his imitators would blow up the integrity of our elections, or that they have expressly countenanced a violent insurrection against the federal government, or that they basically admit to having no governing agenda beyond the reclamation of some mythical White heritage.

It's also that the Trumpist GOP advances the notion, in all kinds of ways, that citizenship alone doesn't mean you belong here — that your race or ethnicity, the language that you speak, or the identity you choose can somehow make you less American than your neighbor.

We've seen this interpretation of Americanism before — in segregated schools and diners, in the internment of Japanese Americans, in populist disdain for Catholics and Jews. No patriotic American should entertain it, and no politician with an ounce of integrity would excuse it.

You might think, given this Republican calamity, that any political alternative would be sufficient. And, yes, a party that *doesn't* seek to limit ballot access and install an autocrat is definitely a step up.

But that doesn't mean a lot of us who consider ourselves liberal feel kinship with today's Democratic Party — or that we'd even be welcome if we did.

Rather than focus on traditional American ideals of citizenship over race or origin, the left is in thrall to its own misguided cultural revolution (yes, I use the term deliberately), embracing a vision of the United States that lays waste to the 20th-century liberalism of its greatest icons.

I've always liked and respected President Biden, and in most ways he has governed well. His \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package was a major achievement. His efforts to counter the pandemic have been steady. He seems poised to make a historic addition to the Supreme Court.

For all of his successes, though, there's a fire raging in his party that Biden hasn't even tried to control — and probably couldn't extinguish if he did. For me (and probably a lot of suburbanites voting this fall), this is more than a backdrop to his presidency. It's a dealbreaker.

In their zeal to beat back Trumpism, the loudest Democratic groups have transformed into its Bizarro World imitators. Tossing aside ideals of equal opportunity and free expression, the new leftists obsess on identity as much as their adversaries do — but instead of trying to restore some obsolete notion of a White-dominated society, they seek vengeance under the guise of virtue.

One of the bibles of this movement is a book called "How to Be an Antiracist," in which Ibram X. Kendi declares: "The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination."

This is not — as the celebrated author claims — an expression of support for Lyndon B. Johnson-style affirmative action, which still makes sense to me. It is a case for the kind of social upheaval that occurred when foreign empires relinquished their colonies. It does not end well.

Liberals used to believe in civil debate about such ideas. But now, the arbiters of language are constantly issuing Soviet-style edicts about which terms are acceptable and which aren't ("woke" was okay, now it's not) — a tactic used for controlling the debate and delegitimizing critics.

We can disagree about whether this radical uprising is necessary or politically self-destructive. But it's clearly not in keeping with the principles that are supposed to unite the country.

I was taught — and still believe — that in the United States, we are bound not by common origin, language or culture but by a series of laws and values that make us who we are.

As long as you swear allegiance to those laws and values — racial equality, free speech, unfettered worship — then you're no more or less American than anyone else, and no less deserving of respect, protection and opportunity.

That we've failed to honor that promise over the life of the country, and are failing still, doesn't mean you throw up your hands and abandon the project. It means you rededicate yourself to the ideal of true equality, rather than reducing individuals to a box on a census form.

This is the ideology that both parties used to call liberalism. There is no longer room for it in today's stark political dichotomy.

In part, it's a testimony to the damage that one shameless and unprincipled man managed to wreak on our politics. Trump always had a talent for bringing out the worst in everyone; more than a year after leaving office, he remains the decaying star by which everyone else in our political solar system must orient themselves.

But it's also the result of an antiquated primary system — at the presidential level and below — that plays to an ever-winning group of fervent believers in both parties.

The more people grow disgusted with extremist party politics, the more only those extremists are heard and the more power they exert on anyone who wants to run for higher office.

This is about the point where some (most likely some in my own business) will scream: "Both sidesism!" That's the now-cliche argument that any criticism of Democrats whatsoever must be some kind of journalistic reflex to equate the parties, when clearly one is worse than the other.

One is worse than the other. But that doesn't mean we have to feel jazzed about supporting a party that would grade our worthiness as people on a sliding scale of identity. It doesn't change the fact that the broad center of the American electorate — traditional conservatives and liberals both — no longer has a political home.

So where do we go?

For years, I've predicted the eventual triumph of an independent president, outside the two-party system. That candidate hasn't emerged, but the lane for a credible independent has never been wider.

There's also the probability that some reformist Democratic governor or political novice is looking at the political landscape and thinking that, if you could unify that liberal constituency inside the party, you might just be able to commandeer it.

I've never been very good at predicting the path ahead. What I do know is that politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum — and, one way or another, a force will arise to fill the space at the eye of our destructive political storm.

Until then, you can call me a dissenter.

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