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The Power of the Civic Mindset: A Conceptual Framework for Overcoming Political Polarization

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This Article proposes a new conceptual paradigm for overcoming political polarization—the civic mindset. I argue that the primary psychological barrier to bridging political divides is an adversarial state of mind called the partisan mindset, and I explain its specific characteristics, fundamental operating principles, and triggers. To combat polarization, I introduce the civic mindset, elucidate its basic features and functions, and explain how societal embrace of this unique outlook can advance a vibrant political space within which partisan competition and national unity can thrive.

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The Power of the Civic Mindset: A Conceptual Framework for Overcoming Political Polarization

DANIEL L. SHAPIRO *

INTRODUCTION

By design, democracy generates political tension. Opposing advocacy groups lobby for legislation, competing political parties must write, debate, and pass laws, and government branches conflict due to intentional overlap in responsibilities.¹ But while tension is expected, contemporary politics is on fire.² Political elites humiliate one another, legislators strategize ways to “win” a policy dispute and showcase the other party’s loss, and community members refuse to interact with their counterpart—generating a kind of “political warfare” that risks uprooting democratic institutions and the belief in their efficacy.³ Partisanship is natural, but intense polarization can jeopardize the system itself.

Understanding the factors that contribute to political polarization can direct us to strategies to combat them. Social scientists have uncovered a variety of reasons for political divisiveness including economic disparities, discriminatory laws, gerrymandering, and media bias.⁴ While such structural

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¹ *Separation of Powers—An Overview*, NAT’L CONF. ST. LEGISLATURES (May 1, 2019), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/separation-of-powers-an-overview.aspx>.

² An alternative metaphor may be that political sentiments are becoming colder. A Pew Research Center study found that between 2016 and 2019, the number of Republicans who gave Democrats a “cold” rating on a “feeling thermometer” from 1–100 rose by 14% and the number of Democrats who gave Republicans a cold rating grew by 16%. *Growing Shares in Both Parties Give “Cold” Ratings to Those in Opposing Party*, PEW RES. CTR. (Oct. 10, 2019), https://www.people-press.org/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/pp_2019-10-10_state-of-parties_0-01/ (showing a “feeling thermometer” to demonstrate how partisans give members of the opposite party a “cold rating”).

³ Sean Theriault, *Partisan Warfare Is the Problem*, in *POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN AMERICAN POLITICS* 11, 11–15 (Daniel J. Hopkins & John Sides eds., 2015).

⁴ *See* 2 RED AND BLUE NATION? CONSEQUENCES AND CORRECTION OF AMERICA’S POLARIZED

forces predispose citizens to polarization, the ultimate arbiter of political behavior is the human heart.⁵ Political action from policy negotiations to voting behavior is heavily informed by mood, emotion, and attitude.⁶ In contemporary society, politics has become so emotionally charged that brutal partisan politics is the norm—resulting in gridlock, harsh character judgments, and, perhaps most ominously, threat to the survival of the democratic system.⁷

This Article offers a new conceptual approach for overcoming polarization. I argue that the major psychological barrier to political cooperation is a divisive outlook I term the *partisan mindset*—a state of mind with specific characteristics, fundamental operating principles, and triggers. To overcome this psychological obstacle, I conceptualize an alternative state of mind—the *civic mindset*—that motivates concern for our own political interests *and* the legitimate interests of the multitude of political groups within society, resulting in a vibrant political space within which partisan competition *and* national unity can thrive.

I. WHAT'S YOUR POLITICAL MINDSET?

Mindset frames how we see the world and our place in it—including what we attend to, what we ignore, and how we make meaning of events. Politicians who view themselves as adversaries can spend years unsuccessfully debating legislation while political allies can solve the same issue in a single hallway conversation. The way they view their relationship has a big impact on the outcome of their exchange.

Drawing on relational identity theory,⁸ I conceive of *political mindset* as the lens through which we make sense of the political landscape and orient relationally to political stakeholders. This mindset patterns our cognitive and emotional world, providing us with affectively tinged assumptions about whom to trust or doubt. In the public arena, the mindset we adopt acts as a pair of glasses that colors the way we perceive the entire political landscape and our place in it. We easily can detect the political mindset in a neighbor

POLITICS (Pietro S. Nivola & David W. Brady eds., 2008) (containing a variety of essays discussing the roots of political divisiveness in the United States).

⁵ See JONATHAN HAIDT, *THE RIGHTEOUS MIND: WHY GOOD PEOPLE ARE DIVIDED BY POLITICS AND RELIGION* 34 (2012) (discussing the role human emotion plays in political behavior and noting “[t]he head can’t even do head stuff without the heart”).

⁶ See *id.* at 152–53 (discussing how the two ends of the political spectrum rely on “moral foundations”).

⁷ See Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How a Democracy Dies*, *NEW REPUBLIC*, Jan.–Feb. 2018, at 17, 19 (discussing how modern politics poses a threat to the U.S. democratic system).

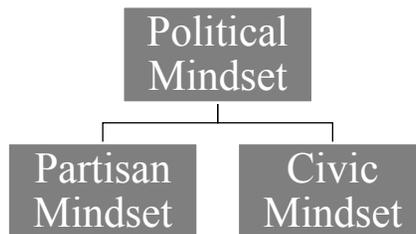
⁸ See Daniel L. Shapiro, *Relational Identity Theory: A Systematic Approach for Transforming the Emotional Dimension of Conflict*, 65 *AM. PSYCHOLOGIST* 634, 634 (2010) (discussing relational identity theory).

who asks us, “Why on earth did you vote for *that* candidate?” This person holds an adversarial mindset and is primed to attack our views.

We tend to assume everyone wears distorting glasses but us. We think others see the world through glasses that bias their understanding of reality, whereas we see the world as it is, a glass-less truth. But this is obviously not true. Social cognition predisposes everyone toward a biased interpretation of reality.⁹ Consequently, becoming aware of our own mindset frees us to decide whether to adopt a more constructive one.

In the following sections, I introduce two mindsets that offer us choice on how to view the political landscape. One fuels polarization; the other quells it.

Chart 1. Two fundamental political mindsets.



II. THE PARTISAN MINDSET

The political mindset most responsible for fueling polarization is what I term the *partisan mindset*, a divisive outlook that pits us against another political entity.¹⁰ This Section describes the nature and attributes of the partisan mindset, its operating principles, and the ways it gets fostered.

To understand the partisan mindset, we must appreciate the basic elements and function of a tribe. I define a tribe as any group whose members view themselves as like-kindred, kin-like in their relational connection, and emotionally invested in the group’s enhancement.¹¹ Being of like kind signifies that group members identify themselves as part of a shared political entity, whether a neighborhood organization, religious sect, or formal political party. Kin-like connection defines the nature of the relationship between members, who view themselves not as part of a loose affiliation or coalition but as members of an extended family, a deeply felt

⁹ See DANIEL KAHNEMAN, THINKING, FAST AND SLOW 4 (2011) (describing how human impressions, intuitions, and decisions are not conscious choices).

¹⁰ See DANIEL SHAPIRO, NEGOTIATING THE NONNEGOTIABLE: HOW TO RESOLVE YOUR MOST EMOTIONALLY CHARGED CONFLICTS, at xvii (2017). The partisan mindset is a politically nuanced subtype of the *tribes effect* described in NEGOTIATING THE NONNEGOTIABLE: HOW TO RESOLVE YOUR MOST EMOTIONALLY CHARGED CONFLICTS 26 (2017).

¹¹ Shapiro, *supra* note 8, at 638.

bond. Emotional investment refers to the motivation of members to enhance the tribe's status, power, and durability even in the face of personal sacrifice.

The partisan mindset activates when we feel a threat to our tribal identity. Specific social cognitive conditions stimulate this perspective shift. At a bare minimum, there must be a salient threat to our identity, we must prioritize our tribal identity over other social identities, and the mindset itself must be cognitively accessible.¹² The result is a relational outlook that predisposes us to experience divisive feelings, thoughts, and behavior toward the perceived source of threat.

A. *Key Attributes*

The partisan mindset has three major elements that affect our political worldview:¹³

1. *Adversarial*

We tend to view competing political parties through an adversarial lens that magnifies differences and minimizes similarities. A threat to our identity instigates a kind of relational amnesia, in which we ignore the countless personal and structural connections and fixate on political differences. Philosopher Martin Buber describes this movement toward disaffiliation as a shift from an "I-Thou" to an "I-It" relationship.¹⁴ A state of emotional arousal, such as that triggered during times of political tension, reduces the cognitive complexity of our social perceptions and results in polarized evaluations of our counterpart.¹⁵ At the extreme, daily confrontation with our own physical, mental, or collective mortality can heighten the perceived significance of our own group and lead us to devalue those who threaten our identity.¹⁶

2. *Self-righteous*

The partisan mindset involves the self-serving conviction that our political views are not only right, but morally superior. We assume that morality exists on a single, exclusive moral plane and reject the idea that multiple perceptions of political truth can coexist.¹⁷ Self-righteousness is

¹² SUSAN T. FISKE & SHELLY E. TAYLOR, *SOCIAL COGNITION: FROM BRAINS TO CULTURE* 342 (2007).

¹³ SHAPIRO, *supra* note 10, at 27.

¹⁴ MARTIN BUBER, *I AND THOU* 62–64 (Charles Scribner's Sons trans., Touchstone 1st ed. 1996) (1970).

¹⁵ Delroy L. Paulhus & David T. K. Lim, *Arousal and Evaluative Extremity in Social Judgments: A Dynamic Complexity Model*, 24 *EUR. J. SOC. PSYCHOL.* 89, 90, 94 (1994).

¹⁶ Jeff Greenberg et al., *Evidence for Terror Management Theory II: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Threaten or Bolster the Cultural Worldview*, 58 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 308, 317 (1990).

¹⁷ The Pew Research Center found that in today's polarized society, a majority of Democrats and

founded on arrogance and is distinguishable from righteous indignation—the boiling anger that emerges when we confront injustice.

3. *Insular*

The partisan mindset locks us in a closed political system. We watch news shows that reinforce our political views, frequent social media sites that support our political values, build friendships with those who maintain similar perspectives, and resist talking politics with political counterparts. The more closely we follow public affairs, the more likely we are to express negative sentiments about the opposing party,¹⁸ bolstering hostility toward our political counterpart.

B. *Operating Principles*

The partisan mindset operates on a few basic principles. First, loyalty to the tribe takes priority.¹⁹ People who identify heavily with a political tribe will tend to make greater sacrifices for their own tribe than for other groups. Social evolutionists have discovered that the likelihood of our committing a costly altruistic action depends upon the genetic closeness to the recipient and the benefit to that person or group;²⁰ we sacrifice more for those who share our bloodlines. Human psychology extends this tendency to individuals who are connected through *perceived* kinship, thus imbuing political tribes with substantial influence over political action.

Second, partisan norms urge blind loyalty to the party platform—regardless of the degree to which policies serve personal interest.²¹ This affords tribal leaders great personal power because they can rely on their political base to support their policies and block plans of political foes. But blind loyalty erodes merit-based decision making, because people care more about maintaining fidelity to their own political party than about finding ways to advance the legitimate interests of the multitude of political groups within society.

Third, cooperation with political outgroups is taboo. During times of polarization, the mere act of being seen talking with members of another political party, let alone negotiating in good faith, can fuel accusations of betrayal and result in political and social punishment.

Republicans view the other side as closed-minded, and a substantial set of partisans judged their counterpart as immoral. *Most Republicans and Democrats View Each Other as More Closed-Minded Than Other Americans*, PEW RES. CTR. (Oct. 10, 2019), https://www.people-press.org/2019/10/10/how-partisans-view-each-other/pp_2019-10-10_state-of-parties_2-01/; *Growing Shares in Both Parties Give “Cold” Ratings to Those in Opposing Party*, *supra* note 2.

¹⁸ *Most Republicans and Democrats View Each Other as More Closed-Minded Than Other Americans*, *supra* note 17.

¹⁹ Shapiro, *supra* note 8, at 638.

²⁰ W. D. Hamilton, *The Genetical Evolution of Social Behaviour*, 7 J. THEORETICAL BIOLOGY 1, 8 (1964).

²¹ Shapiro, *supra* note 8, at 635, 639.

In sum, the partisan mindset prioritizes allegiance to the tribe, fosters blind loyalty to the party platform, and condemns cross-party engagement.

C. *What Fosters the Partisan Mindset?*

There are many roads to political polarization—but through my international work in conflict resolution over the past thirty years, I have observed a prevalent dynamic that I call the “Declare-Defend-Descend Model.”

Declare. This dynamic begins when a person or group communicates their political identity subtly or explicitly within a conversation or through a formal or informal platform. Consider an example between two attorneys, Leigh and Ron. As they enter the elevator to head home after work, Leigh says, “I can’t believe how awful that congressman’s speech was last night!” She implicitly declares aspects of her political identity through this statement. But Ron hears her words as an assault on his own sacred values, awakening the partisan mindset in him and impelling him to say, “I actually thought the congressman had a lot of guts to say what he did!” He declares *his* political identity.

Defend. Now these lawyers are experiencing a clash of identities, and their conversation moves toward self-defensive measures.²² Ron frets over his working relationship with Leigh. Sharing opposing politics feels taboo, and he worries that if they delve too deeply into political conversation, they may never get out. Taboos protect their relationship and identities from harm.

In an attempt to understand Leigh’s perspective, Ron asks, “Why didn’t you like the congressman’s speech?” His intention is admirable, but his tone exudes self-righteous indignation. The more Leigh justifies her stance, the more compelled he feels to argue back. He fights within himself to resist turning the conversation into a fierce debate and musters willpower not to pick apart her arguments one-by-one, let alone to dismiss her entire character.

Descend. Finally, the time comes for Ron to share his own perspective. The moment he launches into his rationale, she attacks it with unexpected ferocity, and they get consumed in a vertigo-like swirl of exasperated anger. Fortunately, they temper their emotions and close the conversation on an amicable note. That night, Ron laments to a close friend, “How can Leigh—in her right mind—criticize the congressman’s effectiveness?” The friend supports Ron’s perspective, bolstering his belief in the legitimacy of his claims and vindicating him of intellectual and moral ineptitude. This is identity politics in action—enlisting his friend to affirm his political stance so he can feel “in the right”—despite that same confirmation fortifying the

²² SHAPIRO, *supra* note 10, at 148.

partisan mindset. Unsurprisingly, the relationship between Ron and Leigh descends.

This experience illuminates a set of emotional dynamics that draws us into the partisan mindset. In my book, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, I introduce these “lures,” which often affect our relationships outside of our conscious awareness:²³

- *Vertigo* is a warped state of consciousness in which a conflictual relationship consumes our emotional energies. In a polarized society, we can become obsessed with conflict amid the twenty-four-hour news cycle of “breaking news,” the constant stream of on-line partisan criticism, and daily political smears by public officials and activists.
- An *assault on the sacred* is an attack on the most meaningful aspects of our identity, whether political values, views, or beliefs. Leaders easily can incite constituents to take political action by framing an issue as an assault on sacred beliefs, values, and allegiances. A politician, for example, may try to gain support for war by framing it as a critical means “to eliminate grave, imminent threats to the lives of our children here in our homeland.”
- *Taboos* are social prohibitions—actions we are not supposed to do, thoughts we are not supposed to think, and emotions we are not supposed to feel. During times of political polarization, a taboo on cross-party engagement can affect people at all levels of society—from senior leadership being accused of betrayal if they talk with the “enemy” to everyday citizens who avoid political or social conversation with colleagues holding opposing views.
- The *repetition compulsion* lures us to repeat a dysfunctional pattern of behavior, as when officials predictably reach political stalemate at the same time each year over the same policy issue. This lure afflicts interpersonal relations, too. When discussing heated political issues, we may reenact a destructive dispute resolution behavior that we learned in our younger years, such as treating every conflict as a confrontation.

²³ *Id.* at xvii. In *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, I call these forces the “five lures of the tribal mind.”

- *Identity politics* is the process of allying with a person or group in order to advance a political purpose. A political leader delivering a speech may state that “in the name of our lost soldiers and family members, in the name of our constitutional ideals, we must stick together to fight the evil enemy!” This leader builds affiliation with the audience through shared history and values, and uses those associations to garner political support for military action.

These five lures pull us toward the partisan mindset in conflicts of all sizes, from international divides to everyday political disputes. In fact, if you re-read the argument between Ron and Leigh, you will notice that each of the lures was present and drew the colleagues toward the partisan mindset. The two lawyers’ relationship survived, but a democracy that operates purely on political tribalism has no backbone and slowly, piece by piece, can fall.²⁴ It turns out, however, that the partisan mindset is not a *fait accompli*. I now introduce an alternative mindset that can be enlisted to increase societal cohesion and democratic ideals.

III. THE CIVIC MINDSET

The political mindset most responsible for bridging partisan divides in democratic societies is what I term the *civic mindset*, a unifying outlook that connects people together via identification as fellow citizens who work together to address the legitimate interests of political groups, resolve differing interests through mutually acceptable processes, and take communal need into account. This Section introduces the mindset, its operating principles, and the ways in which it is fostered.

The origin of the word *civic* provides insight into its meaning. It derives from the French word *civique*, meaning citizen, and can be traced further back to the Latin phrase *corona civica*, a garland of oak leaves and acorns awarded to those who saved a fellow citizen from death.²⁵ *Civics* invokes a sense of connection, duty, and responsibility to one’s homeland and the people who reside within it.

I have chosen to describe the mindset as “civic,” not “civil.” While the two words are closely aligned and share a similar etymology, the word *civil* often implies respectful behavior, whereas the word *civic* emphasizes the overarching political identity that holds citizens together. My view is that a society with a strong enough civic foundation can withstand even fierce

²⁴ STEVEN LEVITSKY & DANIEL ZIBLATT, *HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE* 77 (2018).

²⁵ *Civic*, OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER’S DICTIONARY, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/civic> (last visited Jan. 20, 2020).

political debate and, in the ideal, emerge with new collective understandings and mutually beneficial action ideas.²⁶

The civic mindset embraces national identity—but not to the exclusion of tribal identity. In general, both dimensions are *equally* important to nurture within the democratic political sphere. A strong national identity encourages policies and political behavior that serve the common good, and inclusive politics empowers diverse groups to voice and address their unique concerns through the shared political system. While tension will inevitably emerge between national and tribal concerns, the civic mindset motivates the quest for a *pareto-optimal* system of political decision making that optimizes these two concerns to the extent possible.

A. Key Attributes

The civic mindset has three key characteristics that shape our political worldview:

1. *Cooperative – But Not Naïve*

The civic mindset motivates us to proactively seek opportunities for cross-party collaboration while recognizing the inherent competitiveness of politics. From a civic perspective, the purpose of the republic is to satisfy citizens' interests through a combination of competition *and* cooperation. Social scientists call this a mixed-motive context, because there is an incentive for citizens to compete and to collaborate.²⁷ Political parties must compete for votes and influence while the broader citizenry can cooperate on countless matters of common concern. Political tribes may battle over laws on abortion, but the entire society can work together on a public campaign to stop teen pregnancy. The civic mindset helps us see this kind of civic possibility. Additionally, this mindset reminds citizens from across political ideologies of the necessity to work together to strengthen core democratic institutions and procedures—the very structures in which political parties compete for power.

2. *Pluralistic*

In valuing the concept of citizenry, the civic mindset encourages toleration of diversity and the notion that multiple perceptions of truth can coexist. This does not mean we must abandon our convictions or assume

²⁶ See, e.g., *Civic*, MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/civic> (last visited Feb. 20, 2020) (defining “civic” as “of or relating to a citizen, a city, citizenship, or community affairs”); *Civil*, MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/civil> (last visited Feb. 20, 2020) (defining “civil” as “adequate in courtesy and politeness”).

²⁷ See, e.g., Philip S. Gallo, Jr. & Charles G. McClintock, *Cooperative and Competitive Behavior in Mixed-Motive Games*, J. CONFLICT RESOL. 68, 68 (1965) (explaining that in mixed-motive situations, the players' goals are “partially coincident and partially in conflict”).

others' beliefs are true. The minimal threshold of pluralism is toleration of diverse perspectives of truth—as long as those worldviews do not impinge upon anyone's constitutional rights or dignity. While this creates space for all citizens' voices, society still must decide the limits of pluralism. Should people *tolerate* multiple perceptions of truth, accept them at a distance, or revere them? Pluralism is key to civic life in a democracy, and it is the people's responsibility to determine its bounds.

3. *Community-spirited*

The civic mindset emphasizes broadscale community welfare.²⁸ This conception of civic responsibility stretches beyond the words in the Constitution to the *spirit* of democracy. We serve the broader community not solely because we must do so by law, but because we *want to*: we internalize an emotional commitment to form a “more perfect union.”²⁹ This expansive identity creates political space for tribes of all types to feel emotionally included in society and to engage in the political process. Every citizen is an equal part of the national project. The mission of the United States Army, for example, is not to protect *some* citizens over others but to provide for “the defense of the United States, the Commonwealths and possessions and any areas occupied by the United States.”³⁰

Chart 2 summarizes the qualities of the partisan mindset and civic mindset. The partisan mindset lures us toward polarization whereas the civic mindset opens political space for cooperation.

Chart 2. The contrasting characteristics of the partisan mindset and civic mindset.

Partisan Mindset		Civic Mindset	
1.	Adversarial	1.	Cooperative
2.	Self-righteous	2.	Pluralistic
3.	Insular	3.	Community-spirited

B. *Operating Principles*

The civic mindset operates on a few basic principles. First, loyalty to the republic takes on deep importance. Even kindergarteners in most U.S. states pledge allegiance every day “to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands.”³¹ This does not mean we must abandon our tribal identity or view it as inferior, but that we locate it—in all its glory and wholeness—within the broader sphere of a civic identity, at least within

²⁸ The preamble of the U.S. Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal.” THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE para. 2 (U.S. 1776).

²⁹ U.S. CONST. pmb1.

³⁰ 10 U.S.C. § 7062 (2018).

³¹ 4 U.S.C. § 4 (2018).

the context of political decision making. Much like the relationship between an eggshell and yolk, there is a symbiotic relationship between national and tribal identification. Widespread affiliation with the nation enhances the felt connection between tribes, which increases trust in the broader political system and better enables individual tribes to address their concerns.

Second, wherever possible, political issues are tackled through cooperative decision making rather than through blind loyalty politics. Political tribes still compete for power and influence but also draw on cross-party cooperation to optimize societal decision making. Inter-party cooperation may sound like a wishful vision within a polarized society, but this civic-minded outlook has proven successful at various points in American political history. A classic example is President Kennedy's emphasis on public service. Other cultures also have leveraged the power of cross-group cooperation for societal benefit. Japanese economic scholars credit much of their country's industrial success to the embrace of the philosophy of its Omi merchants who, beginning in the medieval period, measured success by the degree to which their business was good for themselves, the customer, and society.³²

Third, the civic mindset fosters the felt duty to negotiate across party lines to solve societal issues, and to feel ashamed if one fails to do so in good faith. If enough leaders and social influencers advocate for this approach, norms of political communication can shift.³³ Strikingly, interstate war joins citizens of opposing political persuasions in a united front against an external enemy, producing a civic mindset of sorts. As polarization tears at the seams of democracy, citizens would be wise to adopt that same mindset.

C. *Fostering the Civic Mindset*

There are at least two major pathways to cultivate a civic mindset. The first is to adopt the role of a civic leader who acts cooperatively, thinks pluralistically, and engages with a community-minded spirit. Anyone can get involved in local politics, write an op-ed, start a political blog, or serve the community by volunteering at an eldercare facility or school. One also can encourage *others* to take up their civic duties. A simple example took place in my home last week. My fourteen-year old son Noah sometimes gets

³² Kenzo Moriguchi, *Forum Holds Up Omi Feudal Merchants as Models of Corporate Responsibility*, JAPAN TIMES (Oct. 30, 2001), <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2001/10/30/events/forum-holds-up-omi-feudal-merchants-as-models-of-corporate-responsibility/#.XiqG9mhKh3h>.

³³ What happens if one political party embraces a civic mindset and the other holds to a partisan outlook? One might assume that aggressive partisans would pressure civic-minded cooperators to accommodate to their demands. But this oversimplifies the mechanisms of politics. Within any political tribe, there are internal forces advocating for and against issues, there are backchannel negotiations affecting policy decisions, there are cross-party meetings between political advisors—and all of these forums offer the opportunity for the civic-minded leader to influence the decision-making process and to produce results that are better for each political tribe and for society as a whole.

into conflict with his eight-year-old brother Liam. I needed Noah to babysit Liam but was nervous that they might fight. I nearly told Noah not to bully his younger brother while I was gone but instead said, “While I’m out, can you help Liam make his breakfast?” Inviting Noah into the role of household helper fostered in him a kind of civic mindset that elevated his purpose and improved my sons’ dynamic that morning.

Another method to foster the civic mindset is via a method I call the “Connect-Respect-Transcend Model,” which provides an overarching framework for interacting constructively across tribal lines.

Connect. The first step is to build emotional connection.³⁴ Recall Ron and Leigh’s conversation about the congressman’s speech. Before launching into identity declarations, they could have spent a few minutes catching up on each other’s lives. Small talk has big importance, for people come to view each other as multifaceted human beings rather than as partisan stereotypes, and their emotional connection creates a “holding environment” that can sustain the relationship even in the face of acrimony.³⁵ Ron also could have been much more cautious in airing political differences. Rather than responding reflexively in political banter, he could have inquired about Leigh’s interest in talking politics. Though she initiated the conversation, she may have intended to make a simple declaration and not to engage in full-fledged political debate. With mutual consent, they could have entered the taboo territory of political dialogue with greater sensitivity.

Respect. Ron could have demonstrated greater respect for Leigh’s views by asking open-ended questions: What provoked her strong reaction to the congressman’s talk? What values felt assaulted? He could have communicated his understanding of her views, checked in with her to make sure he understood correctly, and shared which values of hers most resonated with him. By respecting her experience, he could have built greater emotional connection.

Resisting the repetition compulsion was paramount to the modest success of their conversation. Given the intensity of Ron’s political beliefs, he was hyperaware of the risk of their conversation becoming adversarial and sought to temper the expression of his strong views. Nevertheless, he could have suggested a simple process to guide their conversation, such as having them each share the *personal significance* of their views, turning the

³⁴ Emotional connections must be built at the national as well as regional and interpersonal levels. In examining ways to stem the tide of political tribalism in the United States, Amy Chua notes that “citizens will . . . need to collectively fashion a national identity capable of resonating with and holding together Americans of all sorts—old and young, immigrant and native born, urban and rural, rich and poor, descendants of slaves as well as descendants of slave owners.” Amy Chua, *Tribal World: Group Identity Is All*, 97 FOREIGN AFF. 25, 33 (2018).

³⁵ See D. W. Winnicott, *The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship*, 41 INT’L J. PSYCHO-ANALYSIS 585, 591 (1960) (indicating that the holding environment of infants is a form of loving).

debate over whose politics is “right” into an emotionally revealing exchange about the roots of their political identities.

Transcend. Ron and Leigh could have been more open to listening for sake of learning. Neither individual’s political views would have changed, but they could have expanded their understanding of the political terrain and important interests at stake for various constituencies.

This is the civic mindset coming to life: We approach differences jointly, commit to the “relentless we,” and refuse to fall prey to political tribalism.³⁶ The more we listen, learn, and share, the more we fall into a positive vertigo—a free-flowing conversation that stirs enthusiasm, curiosity, and fulfillment of our civic duty. We maintain our beliefs while transcending difference.

IN SUMMARY

When political polarization threatens to undermine the ideals and functionality of democracy, there is a societal imperative to embrace a civic mindset. While the partisan mindset pits groups against one another and reduces political space for collaboration, the civic mindset motivates national cohesion and expands political space for mutually beneficial decision making. In this frame of mind, citizens across interest groups cooperate on issues of shared concern, embrace pluralism, and foster a community-minded spirit. Political parties still compete for power and influence—but within a broader identity that binds them together in the quest for a more perfect union.

³⁶ SHAPIRO, *supra* note 10, at 128–29.