

## The State of Partisanship

Thursday, March 6, 2025

*Visit our media library at [constitutioncenter.org/media-library](https://constitutioncenter.org/media-library) to see a list of resources mentioned throughout this program, listen to the episode, and more.*

**[00:00:03.1] Jeffrey Rosen:** Hello, friends. I'm Jeffrey Rosen, President and CEO of the National Constitution Center. And welcome to We the People, a weekly show of constitutional debate. The National Constitution Center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. In this episode, I'm joined by Jonathan Rauch, author of *Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy*, and Julian Zelizer, author of *In Defense of Partisanship*, for a wide-ranging discussion about their new books. We discuss the relationship between religion and civic participation. We explore the evolution of our party system, and we discuss how we can achieve a healthier civic life. Enjoy the show. Welcome Jonathan and Julian. I think your two books together will really cast a crucial light on a central question and the interest in it is obvious from the large crowd that turned out to hear this discussion tonight. What are the sources and potential cures of partisanship in America? And Jonathan, you discuss it in the context of religious partisanship and polarization. And Julian, in the context of political polarization.

**[00:01:16.3] Jeffrey Rosen:** Jonathan, let's start with you. I was sharing before we got on that. A few weeks ago I went to Brigham Young University and talked to 5,000 undergraduates at their weekly convening at the invitation of the Dean. I invited them to stand and recite together the Mormon oath that they take, where they recite virtues that they pledge to achieve in their daily lives. It was incredibly moving to hear 5,000 people recite the virtues in 20 languages which they take as part of their oaths. And just a remarkable and powerful vision of the goal to lead a spiritually self-governed and serious life of purpose and also a civically meaningful life. In your book you offer up the LDS Church as an example of what you call thick Christianity, where it's possible to embrace the Madisonian values of pluralism and compromise and civility and also lead a religiously serious life. Tell us about why you conclude that and why the LDS Church is a model of thick Christianity.

**[00:02:28.7] Jonathan Rauch:** Well, thank you, Jeff. It's such an honor to be here and with you, such a good friend for so many years. Thank you. So one of the biggest challenges that we face in America today is the failure of institutions. And one of those biggest failures or challenges has

been that of Christianity, which has had an important role since the founding in creating moral and civic structures that our country depends on. And to do that you need churches that are both countercultural, meaning they've got their own values and they teach those values, but at the same time that are aligned with the values of liberal democracy in such a way that democracy in the church can be reasonably mutually supportive. And that's hard to do, and it's gotten harder in recent years. But a church that's really doing that is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I was just out there, as you were a couple weeks before you have, and one of the reasons is that that church has developed a fully articulated, theologically grounded civic theology about how Christians should behave in our politics and in civic forums like social media.

**[00:03:50.9] Jonathan Rauch:** And it's very Madisonian. It's like right out of the Constitution. It's about patience, negotiation, and mutual accommodation, which they call peacemaking. But what really that means is expanding the space for our life together so that when we have conflicts, we can work them out and live together. And they're doing that in a specifically Christian, spiritual, theological, religious context, which fills a hole in American life.

**[00:04:20.7] Jeffrey Rosen:** So powerful, and such a ray of hope for the path forward. Julian, you wrote a great volume for the Yale Jewish Lives series on Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Life of Radical Amazement*. And you say that rather than concluding that secular society posed an inevitable threat to religion, Heschel came to perceive how religion could make secular society a better place for everyone. Tell us about that and your broader reactions to Jonathan's important book.

**[00:04:52.1] Julian Zelizer:** First of all, thanks to both of you, it's great to be with you. And Jonathan has written a terrific book. And I think the argument he just laid out is not just essential for religion, it's essential for civil society. And, you know, it was interesting back in the 1950s and '60s, which is the heyday, not simply of Abraham Heschel's activism, but also his work as a theologian at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He's part of a community in New York where there's many denominations who are writing about existential questions and thinking about interfaith dialogue. They really lived the civic values that Jonathan's talking about. They were all very committed theologians, whether you're talking about Niebuhr or Heschel or many of the figures. But they not only coexisted, they saw the dialogue that they had among themselves and what they did in public as a way to strengthen the religious fabric of a country within a democratic framework. And we've moved so far from that. I mean, part of it, I think, is the 1970s and '80s when you have this alliance between the religious right and the Republican Party, and a Republican Party that will kind of move in a much more aggressive political direction.

**[00:06:14.7] Julian Zelizer:** And it's a shame. And I think his book and the comment which just captured the essence of it is something that we need to figure out. What are the rules of the game? I think something we both think about. How do you reestablish rules for institutions that

can veer into very divisive areas to restrain those impulses even as they have very coherent and forcefully felt beliefs?

**[00:06:43.7] Jeffrey Rosen:** That is the challenge for the path forward, and that's exactly what we're gonna identify in this discussion. But first, let's understand how we got here, 'cause both of you do exactly that. Jonathan, your argument is that the founders counted on civil society, including Christianity, to provide fulfillment in life and teach republican virtues, and Christianity no longer seems up to the job. And that is a result of an important evolution into the growing secularism, which resulted in what you call a thin Christianity, which emerged in the context of broader social secularization. The statistics you quote about secularization are remarkable just in 20 years since 2000, the numbers have been going up dramatically in ways I'd like you to share and then tell us about the evolution from that thin Christianity into what you call sharp Christianity, which is an aggressive and reactionary form of Christianity that's explicitly partisan.

**[00:07:42.9] Jonathan Rauch:** Well, that's a lot. I could filibuster unpacking some of those things, but I will try to go fast and you will stop me at any moment for a footnote or to drill down. 22 years ago, I wrote the dumbest thing I've ever written. And I include it was dumber than my 2015 Atlantic article confidently predicting Donald Trump would never be president. And 22 years ago, I was celebrating secularization in America, saying people are drifting away from religion. Isn't that a good thing? Religion is divisive and often it's ignorant. We'll be better off with less of it. Since then, we have conducted an unprecedented experiment in secularization in American life. Right through the 20th century, 70% of Americans were members of a church. When I was a kid, people, the first thing that people often asked other people when they met if they weren't Jewish was, what church do you go to? Since this century, that number has dropped from about 70 to below half just in 20 years. And there are lots and lots of other numbers like this. It's a dechurching on a scale never seen before. This has resulted in the substitution of pseudo religions.

**[00:09:09.0] Jonathan Rauch:** Some of those are things like Wicca and SoulCycle and Crystals. And some are a lot more dangerous, like radical wokeness and the MAGA movement and QAnon. But a lot of what it is is just politicizing religion and religifying politics so that the next election is an apocalyptic battle between good and evil. So that's been one cost of secularization. Then we had a second wave in the 21st century, evangelical churches, which had been thriving. The White Evangelical church first began to decline in numbers, and at the same time, fueling that, it also began to politicize. It aligned very closely with the Republican Party and then with the MAGA movement and with Donald Trump, so that the two became almost indistinguishable. That made the church smaller because people who didn't favor that course left the church. It made the church sharper, more partisan, more divisive, and more about a culture of fear. We're losing our country. And neither of those things, the thin church, the secularized church that's just not capable of bearing its share, and the sharp church, the partisan church, seems to be capable of

doing the job that in your book you outline what the founders relied on civil society to do, which is to inculcate and teach republican virtues and provide sources of meaning and value in life. How'd I do?

**[00:10:45.6] Jeffrey Rosen:** That was just magnificent. And you also really helped me answer that question that I had set out to answer. How was it possible that sometime in the '60s or '70s, happiness was transformed from meaning being good to feeling good in the pursuit of pleasure rather than virtue? And that question of whether it's possible to live a spiritually directed life outside of the context of religion at a time when religion is declining is one that you just take up with such clarity in the book that it's a really important contribution.

**[00:11:17.8] Jonathan Rauch:** Yeah, yeah. Well, you know, I thought it was possible. I think people can get sources of meaning from lots of places and their spirituality. It doesn't have to be organized religion. And that now just empirically appears to be wrong. It appears that there is no substitute for the commonality of worship in a participatory institutional setting. You can't get that at home on your yoga mat. And it also appears that there are the deep traditions, the theologies of the major religions. Christianity and Judaism and Islam have teachings which themselves can be ennobling and which are not conferred by the kind of do it yourself religions.

**[00:11:58.4] Jeffrey Rosen:** Completely. So, and just one more beat on this, your identification of the theological notion of agency for the LDS Church, which corresponds so well to the central teaching of the Stoic religion, which is, after all, religion of self mastery and self reliance, and of the tradition of the light within in Christianity and Judaism is so clarifying. How important is theology for pluralism?

**[00:12:29.7] Jonathan Rauch:** Well, theology matters. You know, I think it's a mistake that I made earlier in my life and that many of us secular peoples make. I'm a non-believer, I'm an atheistic Jewish gay person, so I'm very much an outsider. But I think a lot of us make the mistake of seeing religion and the great faiths as just kind of a proxy for other things like, you know, demographics and economics and social class and education. It's not. These teachings really matter. The core of my book is the argument that the teachings of Jesus Christ align very closely with the teachings of James Madison and not at all closely with the teachings of MAGA. And so what I call on Christians to do is elevate those core aspects of their own teachings, which buttress our liberal democracy. And you mentioned, of course, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That's what they're doing, and it's not grounded in contingency or in strategy. What they're doing is grounded in theology and this notion of agency about the importance of making moral choices in life and of having the opportunity to, including making wrong choices. And if you need to have the opportunity to make wrong choices, then you want to live in a pluralistic world, not a world where one religion or one idea or one morality dominates. And that leads them to embrace Madisonian pluralism. It's surprising and elegant.

**[00:14:06.3] Jeffrey Rosen:** Just one more beat because it's so important. Tell us about why what you sum up as three tenets of Jesus, be not afraid, imitate me, and forgive each other, mirror the tenets of Madisonian pluralism.

**[00:14:22.3] Jonathan Rauch:** I love to talk about this, so thank you. Yeah. If you had to summarize Christianity on three legs. The Christians I talked to and interviewed and theologians say it's really those three things. Don't be afraid. The most frequently repeated injunction in the Christian Bible, imitate Jesus and forgive each other. So those translate very directly into core virtues of liberal democracy. The founders most worried about a demagogue who would overturn the system using fear. Fear is the easiest thing to mobilize to overturn a democracy. You're under threat. They're coming to get you. There's an invasion. You're being exterminated. Moreover, fear is what you mobilize if you want to overturn an election. The Republican virtues say, "Well, sometimes you'll lose an election. Don't be too afraid. It's not the end of the world. You'll learn something. You'll come back stronger". Number two, Imitate Jesus. Jesus' ministry is two things. First, it's egalitarian. Jesus preaches the fundamental equal worth and dignity of every human being, including, and he emphasizes this, the least among us. And that leads to the second thing he does, which is that emphasis on the marginalized, the minorities. Well, these are also how we judge a liberal democracy.

**[00:15:51.3] Jonathan Rauch:** Does it treat everyone as a basic equal, as having a basic dignity, such that human beings are always treated as ends in themselves, never as means to an end. And also do they protect their minorities. That's the hallmark of a liberal democracy as opposed to an illiberal democracy. There's some things majorities don't have the right or power to do. And then, that third tenet, forgive each other. That translates pretty well into the idea of forbearance, toleration and compromise. So sometimes, if you win an election, the goal after you do that is not to crush the other side, drive them from the country and salt the soil with the tears of their women and children. What you need to do when you win an election is share the country, treat the people you've defeated as your fellow citizens and as you will wanna be treated when the tables are turned someday. And not just for expediency, but because that's a core virtue in and of itself in a liberal democracy. So these things map onto each other very closely. And it's no coincidence the Founders were immersed in these doctrines. And so this is why I'm not asking Christians, for the sake of our democracy, to become more conservative or more progressive or more republican or democratic or secular. I am just asking them to adhere more to the teachings of Jesus.

**[00:17:25.6] Jeffrey Rosen:** That crucial point that you just made, which is that far from being incompatible, the Founders saw liberalism and religion to be mutually interdependent. And you also help us understand why they continually said that personal self-government was necessary for political self-government. And without republic virtue, the republic would fall. Because

unless citizens can find the self-mastery to embody those religious virtues of humility and forbearance and avoiding fear, and above all, attempting to be perfect, to be more perfect, as Jesus, as Socrates were, as Franklin said, then we will succumb to fear, elect demagogues, and allow the Republic to fall. You just did a beautiful job.

**[00:18:13.5] Jonathan Rauch:** Could I just make a short addition to that and then I promise I will yield the floor? Yes, self-mastery is crucial. But the Founders also understood the importance of civil society in helping us master ourselves. They did not expect us to rely simply on ourselves, but they expected that our families, our communities, our schools and our religion would help us to educate our passions toward virtue. They could not assign Christianity the role of supporting democracy, and they deliberately did not do that. But they did expect Christianity to play that part. And they warned us again and again that if we as a society and as individuals failed to inculcate those virtues, that none of the system could not be saved.

**[00:19:09.7] Jeffrey Rosen:** Beautiful.

**[00:19:13.0] Jeffrey Rosen:** Absolutely right. And that's a central contribution of your book, is to remind us that it can't be done alone and that organized religion through much of American history has provided the social support and moral framework necessary for self-cultivation. And as you say, Tocqueville feared that without that spirit of religion it would be impossible to maintain personal and political virtue. And that's the cost of the secularization period that you describe so powerfully. Just a really crucial book. Julian, thank you so much for listening. And now let's put on the table your really important book, *In Defense of Partisanship*. You argue that the solution to today's hyper partisanship is what you call responsible partisanship, which would revolve around strong parties that adhere to guardrails and ensure stability and functional governance.

**[00:20:09.7] Jeffrey Rosen:** And you give us a history of our current political climate, including helping us understand how it was that the Founders wariness toward faction led to the emergence of parties in the early Republic and how the strong committee system in Congress that for so long allowed responsible partisanship was subverted by many forces, including a villain who showed up recently on NCC podcast, Woodrow Wilson, who turns out to have been responsible not only for the populist demagogic presidency as a steward of the people, but also for completely destroying the committee system in Congress. I know there's a lot there too, but introduce the thesis of your book and begin to help us understand the history of how we got here.

**[00:20:57.8] Julian Zelizer:** Yeah, I mean part of this book is an attempt to give a succinct and digestible history of parties. And I start with Madison and the construction of a constitutional system intended to subvert faction and make faction difficult. And lo and behold, as soon as the system gets underway, those factions form, including Madison being part of creating those

factions. And I then try to take us through how the party system, the two-party systems evolved. And one of the things I look at is a history of people who argue that there should be stronger partisanship in the United States. For a long time, there was an argument that there is a virtue to strong parties. Parties, the argument goes, helped to generate big ideas in American politics. And we could think in current times. From FDR in the 1930s to Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party in the 1980s, parties helped to organize action across this different disjointed system and coordinate between Congress and the presidency, rather than just having a system that is purely one of chaos and gridlock, and that when parties work well and are strong, they can serve actually as filters and try to prevent demagogic candidates from reaching the top.

**[00:22:27.5] Julian Zelizer:** And one of the people who made a strong argument for parties was Woodrow Wilson. First major book he writes is about how we almost need a parliamentary system here in the United States, which was really what he envisioned to coordinate action between the president and Congress. He gradually focuses more on the presidency. And then in 1950, the Political Science association put out a famous report for those of us who study this stuff. And it's about responsible partisanship. And the argument is that in Congress, committee leaders have so much power that they have all these fiefdoms that make strong party action almost impossible. And they call for a responsible partisanship where party leaders listen to the rank and file, where party leaders actually are responsible to not just providing gray, but to providing and representing the differences in our political system that were not being reflected on issues like civil rights. And so then, I fast forward to in the '70s, we reform Congress, we create a much more partisan system where there's much more centralization on Capitol Hill, in part a response to these reforms. But then, we moved in the '90s and 2000s to hyper partisanship, which is a kind of partisanship where concern about institutions, concern about governing falls by the wayside.

**[00:23:55.2] Julian Zelizer:** It's a total partisan mentality. I do focus on Republicans as really driving this more than Democrats. And I can explain why there's a difference between the parties which leads us right through today. But I'm really trying to separate the way the institutions are working now versus any kind of inherent reason that partisan institutions can't work very well and have not offered a lot in American political history. And I think we often confuse the two. It's a little like religion. I mean, it's interesting to hear that, that we think today of the problems with religion in public life and how it contributes to some of the underside. But that's not essential to religion at all. And I think it's the same with political parties. And frankly, I think we need political parties because we are divided on many issues, and I'd rather have that represented through the main political system rather than in other ways. And so that's the whole book in 150 pages.

**[00:24:57.2] Jeffrey Rosen:** Beautifully summarized. Let's dig in on some of the history because it's so important. Tell us about the institutional features of the 19th and early 20th century

Congress that ensured regular order and responsible partisanship, the role of the civil rights movement, which it turns out began to exert pressure against the checks that prevented majority rule and then the crucial role of Watergate. And you talk in chapter three about the reforms during the 70s that supplanted the role of committees in the legislative process, which was conducive to bipartisanship into this more centralized, partisan process.

**[00:25:37.8] Julian Zelizer:** Yeah, I mean, by the late 19th century, Washington's a pretty partisan place. And the irony is when Woodrow Wilson publishes this book and is calling for stronger parties, parties are becoming stronger. And if you look at things like roll call voting on Capitol Hill, it's becoming pretty, as we have today, straight line party voting. The tensions between the parties are increasing. This is during the Gilded Age in American history. But then we move away from that. Some of it's the Progressive era, the early 20th century, where we consciously put in reforms that are meant to weaken the power of parties. We rely more on regulatory bodies to make decisions. We enact measures all over, such as the Australian ballot, where you have a secret vote. And so parties don't really know who's voting for who. We have civil service reforms which are meant to not eliminate parties, but to wall off the federal workforce from partisan power. And then on Capitol Hill, by the late '30s and early '40s, you have this coalition form, a bipartisan coalition of Southern Democrats who control most of the major committees, and Republicans from the Midwest like Everett Dirksen of Illinois.

**[00:26:51.0] Julian Zelizer:** And they rule the roost in the House and in the Senate. It's very hard to do anything they don't want. And they often obstruct two big issues, one, unionization and two, civil rights. And so for the civil rights movement in the '50s and '60s, you wouldn't think that congressional procedure would be an issue they talk about a lot, but they do. The NAACP, for example, often lists filibuster reform alongside anti-lynching legislation. They talk about the need to break up this bipartisan coalition that operates in back rooms and weakens the party leaders from doing anything. Because in their minds, the procedure ultimately defended this minority view, which is what they saw on Capitol Hill and was the roadblock to civil rights. So they are actually a driver in the '50s and '60s toward a more partisan political system. And again, many Liberals, Hubert Humphrey, Joseph Clark, a senator from Pennsylvania, thought that bipartisanship was rotting, really rotting the ability of Congress to do anything, it was just that bipartisanship was the source of dysfunction. So that's how civil rights really becomes quite integral. And then it culminates with the struggles in the '60s over first Vietnam and then ultimately Watergate, where many younger members of Congress think this old bipartisan system, this closed door decision-making by a handful of people doesn't work.

**[00:28:24.7] Julian Zelizer:** And they don't understand young Democrats like Henry Waxman or Gary Hart, why we don't have strong parties, why we don't have parties that stand for something and not listen to these cabals within their own system. And so they push for all these reforms that I talk about that really create the foundation for where we eventually go.



**[00:28:50.7] Jeffrey Rosen:** Excellent. And that brings us right to the arguments that you make for how today's hyperpolarization is, in your view, caused by the Republican party's racial polarization from Newt Gingrich to Donald Trump and the continuation of unstable majorities in Congress. Before digging into those arguments, Jonathan, that really brings us to your completely illuminating and important discussion of sharp Christianity and the alliance in between the MAGA movement and the evangelical church. You ask what is Christian nationalism? And which is a question I've really been eager for the answer to, and you're not entirely confident, but you describe it really well. So what's Christian nationalism? How is it allied with the Republican Party? And describe how in your view, that's taken us to where we are today?

**[00:29:55.4] Jonathan Rauch:** Well, I have trouble, Jeff, with the term Christian nationalism because like everyone else who's looked at it, I can't quite figure out what its boundaries are and aren't because it's such a hodgepodge of different things. But a unifying factor, which all the scholars who have explored it agree on, is that Christian nationalism is not Christian. It's not a religious movement. It is not, for example, about the Bible or the teachings of Jesus. Instead, it's a co-optation, if that's a word, a usurpation of Christian symbolism in a secular political movement. That's about power. It's a fundamental tenet. It takes all different forms. You know, there's this Seven Hills ideology, Seven Mountains ideology, and new Apostolic Reformation and post liberalist versions and all kinds of things. But what they really have in common is that people like us are the defenders of Christian Western civilization and should be in power and a hostility in varying degrees to liberal democracy. So that's what it tends to have in common. In my work and my thinking, Jeff, I try to actually downplay Christian nationalism per se because it conjures up this hard right, the people who were there on January 6th with the crosses and you know, the people who go to the Michael Flynn rallies, and those are a minority.

**[00:31:37.0] Jonathan Rauch:** The bigger concern for me, but really for the Christians that I talk to, many of whom are alarmed at the direction of the White Evangelical church, isn't the extremists with the radical views. It's the rank and file people who are taking the culture wars and the political wars into church every day and saying to the pastors, we're under attack in this country as Christians and as Americans, what are we as a church going to do about it? So they are pressing the church to politicize and to align itself in a partisan way. And as the church does that, it shrinks because people who are there for the gospel become non-denominational or leave the church altogether. So you get this self fueling spiral. It's a bit, maybe a bit of a non answer to your question. I'm not sure. I just don't want the hardcore idea of Christian nationalism to occlude this larger phenomenon of politicization.

**[00:32:38.8] Jeffrey Rosen:** Well, I thought it was incredibly illuminating because you show that it's an illiberal movement. And despite the claims of some of its intellectual defenders like

Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule it's not rooted in the founding enlightenment values, but a rejection of them. And in that sense, it's about power and not about either theology or liberalism. And you also show how that coincides with an embrace of Donald Trump by evangelical churches, despite the fact that as you describe it, he is not a paragon of theological or cardinal or classical virtues. To what degree is that movement intertwined in the development of this sharp Christianity, which is so politicized the church is related to this broader political trend.

**[00:33:32.8] Jonathan Rauch:** Well, if you mean the MAGA movement?

**[00:33:34.9] Jeffrey Rosen:** Exactly.

**[00:33:35.9] Jonathan Rauch:** So the White Evangelical church has been becoming politicized since the '80s. You know, the era of Falwell and Pat Robertson. It really turbocharged in this century. And the MAGA movement took it up to the next level. Here's a fact that I bet you didn't know. Not many people do. You remember that famous comment, "My people are so loyal I could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue?" Do you know where he said that? This is interesting. It was Dordt College. That's an evangelical college in Iowa. And it's the same speech where he also says something else almost equally famously. He says, "If you Vote for me, you will have power. Remember that". What he's doing there in that speech and subsequently in many later speeches right through 2024, is offering White Evangelicals a bargain. I will give you power and you will give me loyalty. And that according to Christians like Russell Moore, Southern Baptist Convention former high official and so forth, that's a corruption of Christianity, which is supposed to be fixed on the next world, not on power in this world. And that's a fundamental change in the orientation of what the church is supposed to be doing. And that's the real concern here.

**[00:35:06.7] Jeffrey Rosen:** Absolutely fascinating. Julian, this does relate to your arguments in Chapter four about the reasons for today's hyperpolarization being asymmetric polarization. Tell us about that and how it relates to the alliance of MAGA with the evangelical church.

**[00:35:25.2] Julian Zelizer:** Yeah, so, I mean, this is an argument some social scientists have talked about and a few journalists, Norm Ornstein and Matthew Grossman, that I think is very convincing. And essentially the argument is, since the '90s, both parties have become more polarized. The center in both parties has diminished. Both parties have been more aggressive in pursuing their agendas. But you've seen a much more extremist shift in the Republicans in thinking about what's permissible and what's not. And I started, I mean, our timing isn't that different. I started really with Newt Gingrich as a figure to understand where this comes from, who openly would discuss in memos to colleagues the need to not only speak and use more toxic language, but to be less concerned with norms of governing, to be less concerned with what will this do to the institution as opposed to obtaining power. Then you have the Tea Party, which is

an acceleration of some of the kinds of thinking that I think was introduced in terms of weaponizing almost anything. And for me, you see that with the debt ceiling fights under President Obama in 2011 and '13, where you have a party that's seriously willing not to raise the debt ceiling, which would send us into default, that's a process whereby we approve money that's already been approved, essentially to use it and many other examples, and then culminating in Trump.

**[00:37:01.5] Julian Zelizer:** And that radicalization of the Republican Party, I think, is different from what Democrats are ever going to be capable of. And I argue Democrats are a party of government. And because of that, there's limits on how much they can do or how much they will be willing to do to the governing process. Whereas Republicans have become an anti-government party. And we're much more comfortable with the risks and the gridlock. Part of the Coalition that I'm talking about includes the religious right, which I think you see the compromises Jonathan's talking about already, a bit in the 1980s. I mean, there was a pragmatism to the movement when it started with the Moral Majority. Thinking about the value of Reagan, right from the start, I think, like the broader party, it keeps intensifying. So I talk about that, and that kind of leads into my notion of responsible partisanship, which is different from the political scientists of 1950. And it's party leaders who are strong, who are vigorous, who are robust in their differences, but adhere to some set of rules and principles in terms of what's legitimate. So we protect our institutions, so we protect the ability to govern.

**[00:38:19.0] Julian Zelizer:** And I think we've lost that. And the other thing I talk about in that chapter is we've also layered onto this, have been in a period since the mid-90s, which my colleague Francis Lee has really written about, well, where majorities are no longer stable. And so, you know, from really the early '30s through the 1990s, other than a few exceptions, Democrats controlled Congress the whole time. And while there were problems with that, certainly if you were Republican, it did create a kind of stability where the majority party was willing to negotiate with the minority party 'cause they had nothing. They weren't gonna lose power the next year or next election, and the minority party had an incentive to stay in the game and bargain. But we're now in a period on top of this hyper partisan philosophy and mentality, where control shifts every year, and it's the same in presidential elections so the incentives are not to give away a thing. And that's a really combustible combination I think we have, which is part of where we've ended up in 2025.

**[00:39:28.5] Jeffrey Rosen:** What's so powerful about putting both of your great books in conversation with each other is, Julian, you argue that although you think the polarization was asymmetric, nevertheless it was the result of two factors that affected both parties. Institutional reforms pushed by both parties that allowed party leaders to assert control and geographic self sorting these electoral shifts that sorted voters geographically and both contributed to hyper partisanship. And Jonathan, you then trace how that resulted in this religious partisanship and the

alliance of MAGA with an increasingly polarized GOP in a way that made the pursuit of both responsible partisanship and thick Christianity and the pursuit of virtue elusive. Okay, so now we've got 15 minutes to solve all of this, and our viewers are, of course, eager for solutions. Will the guardrails hold in the months ahead is one question. Will someone speak to civic virtue and identify the important ones?

**[00:40:37.4] Jeffrey Rosen:** John Middleton there's so many ways of parsing it, but the LDS Church identifies some in their doctrines and covenants, and Ben Franklin identifies others. And they're similar. And the Franklin virtues include versions of the classical virtues. Temperance, prudence, order, resolution, humility. Franklin saved the one he found hardest for last. They tend to be off of the classical virtues.

**[00:41:04.6] Julian Zelizer:** That would be hard for Franklin.

**[00:41:06.8] Jeffrey Rosen:** Yes, no, exactly. He imagined the book Humility by Benjamin Franklin. He resisted that. But these are all the virtues that the founders identified as key to their definition of the pursuit of happiness. Jonathan the solution is to trite a task for the awe inspiring challenge of resurrecting a sense of spiritual purpose in a society that's lost it. But although you give the LDS Church as a possible model, say more about the incredible things they've done, including finding moderate compromises on questions like LGBTQ rights. It's such an inspiring vision of constitutional pluralism meeting thick Christianity. And then, how in practice might that be a model for people of other faiths?

**[00:42:00.7] Jonathan Rauch:** Well, it's important to say that I'm not saying that people have to become members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to save our country or anything like that. What I am saying is this is a model of a contemporary church that is in the United States, predominantly white, very conservative socially and culturally, that nonetheless is developing a civic theology that is Christlike and Madisonian at the same time. And they're not just writing that on paper or preaching it. They're putting it into action. This all first got my attention that something interesting was happening in Utah in 2015 when the church joined with Equality Utah, which is the state LGBT rights group, and conservatives in the legislature to fashion a compromise which extended civil rights protections to LGBT Utahns and packaged those alongside important religious liberty protections, but carefully constrained so that, for example, Brigham Young University would not have to house same sex married couples in its married student housing. And that was a first. And then they sought to replicate it and looked like it wouldn't get replicated until 2022. So I'm a gay man. I am married to a man. There was talk in the aftermath of the abortion decision that the Supreme Court might have second thoughts about same sex marriage.

**[00:43:36.4] Jonathan Rauch:** So Democrats put out a bill that would enshrine same sex marriage in federal statute by law, which it had not, been. As you can imagine, White Evangelicals and the Conference of Bishops, Catholic bishops were against that. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as some other groups like the Seventh Day Adventists and the Orthodox unions, got together and helped fashion once again a compromise that enshrined my marriage in federal law. Remember, the church is against same sex marriage. You can get excommunicated in their church if you do it. So why would they allow my marriage in federal law? It's packaged with, again, robust and important new religious liberty protections for people like themselves who dissent. What are they doing here? It's the classic Madisonian model. They call it peacemaking, I call it deconflicting. They're using negotiation creatively to expand the space so that we can live together with less friction. They're saying if we get more room to practice our theology in our community, we have no objection to other people doing things in a different way. And that to me is a very different model of how a conservative church can function in America today than what we're seeing from White Evangelicals.

**[00:45:05.5] Jeffrey Rosen:** It's an incredibly powerful and inspiring model, as you say. Julian, your final chapter offers a series of proposals for achieving responsible partisanship, including disarming the weapons of hyper partisan destruction in the context of the filibuster and Senate confirmation processes and campaign finance, permanently restoring regular order in Congress, which I want you to tell us about. And then of course, the crucial importance of leadership. Let's focus on regular order and congressional reform. Yuval Levin, of course, has a very important new book out, *American Covenant*, saying that the solution to resurrecting the Madisonian system, where all three branches independently check each other, rather than allowing all power to consolidate in the executive, is reinvigorating Congress. And that would include reforms like regular order. Tell us what that is and then address this obvious and important question. Given the hyper partisanship and dysfunctions of the system, how in practice could a political movement arise that in fact would reform Congress in the way that the framers hoped?

**[00:46:12.7] Julian Zelizer:** So first, I have no short term kind of vision of how this will happen. And I don't write a book like this for that purpose. I'm a historian. I look backward, but even when I'm looking at earthly reforms. The point is this is a big picture and a set of ideas to put out there. And I'm gonna come back to that. So some reforms I propose are very concrete, apparently technical reforms that that's what they sound like. But it's really thinking of what are some of the most dangerous mechanisms and processes that have been weaponized and can we do something about it? And so, one example is the debt ceiling to come back to that, it's not part of the Constitution. And there's been a lot of discussion in both parties, frankly, even President Trump floated it, about either eliminating it altogether or instituting reforms, which we've had in the past, which make it automatic to increase the debt ceiling so we don't have to risk default when the parties are fighting over the budget. So that's a kind of very specific reform where I

think we take one of the worst things we've seen and take it off the table so the parties don't have that to use anymore.

**[00:47:27.0] Julian Zelizer:** Regular order is something, you get a lot of bipartisan support, ironically, for it. And it simply goes against strong parties. So there's a contradiction. And the point is there needs to be more of a textbook procedural process where committees have more input in crafting legislation. The rank and file have ways to get their ideas in there so the party leaders aren't simply acting as totally autonomous creatures essentially on Capitol Hill. I don't see that as a total contradiction because I argue if members feel more buy-in to what parties actually produce, I think it's healthier for the parties even when they're loggerheads. I think you want parties that don't feel like two people in a room are essentially dictating the pace of the negotiation. So it's reestablishing rules that make it harder for parties to simply smush everything together in one big bill, not let anyone read it and get it through until the end. Leadership is the most amorphous, and I get that. But it's vital. And I argue in studies of leadership, people focus on transformative leaders who are leaders, who change the way we think of problems, change the debate again. FDR, Ronald Reagan are two classic presidential examples.

**[00:48:52.0] Julian Zelizer:** We have transactional leaders, leaders who are great at bargaining, at putting coalitions together, not at the big ideas, but at that part of politics. But I think we need normative leadership. I really think we are, in a moment, we need leaders in Congress who run for president, local politics, who take the norms seriously, who actually elevate reestablishing norm stability and governing capacity as a central feature of what they're fighting for. How do you get that to happen? Well, the fact is, we haven't had many moments of reform in American history, but we've had some. You didn't anticipate the Progressive Era happening if you were living in the 1880s. You didn't anticipate the reforms of the 1970s happening if you were living in the '60s. And so the key is, does a crisis lead to that? The breakdown of a party, it's not happening right now. But does a sequence of big losses for Republicans, for example, shake the party up? I actually think we had almost a moment like that after 2020, but it moved in a different direction. But the point of these books, from what I have read and I'm listening to with Jonathan, you're writing, so when those moments come and when those leaders come, there's ideas on the table to work with.

**[00:50:21.2] Julian Zelizer:** And so, those are the kinds of reforms I talked about. And there's one I don't talk about as much. Well, sorry. One other I do talk about is the need to integrate party leaders and rank and file members and think about that more. There's a whole argument about hollow parties. And it's not simply that they are hollow in terms of the ability of the leadership to shape what a party does. But there's often a big disconnect between people who feel very loyal to the party and the leadership. They're doing it on their phone, they're doing it through a text, rather than actually becoming integrated into party daily party operations, monthly party conversations. And I talk about reforms where people are using technology to do

that. The one thing that's not in my book, which I actually have come to think about a lot, is the importance of reinvigorated civic space outside of politics. And I count religion as one of them, because I am not one who doesn't think the divisions are real in this country. And I am not one who thinks the 50/50 nation is an illusion. I think it's grounded.

**[00:51:28.5] Julian Zelizer:** But we need spaces, and that can be the bowling alleys of sociologist or political scientist Robert Putnam to Jonathan's kind of reimagined churches where there's space for communal interaction. That kind of is a countervailing pressure to the other kinds of pressures which will continue in politics. And I think that kind of work in communities. It's very important. I think there's ways in which we can be with people we don't agree with politically outside the political arena. And the more we nurture those, I think it just creates a better civic identity and a civic culture.

**[00:52:12.7] Jeffrey Rosen:** Reinvigorating those civic spaces is so crucial in the way you described. I've shared with some of our NCC friends how moving it's been for me to talk about the pursuit of happiness in venues including rural churches, and am still so moved by Frank Martin in Elkhart, Indiana, who gathered 500 retirees in his local church to Talk about founding principles in the pursuit of happiness. No discussion of politics, but a deep craving and uniting around a shared interest in the Constitution and American history.

**[00:52:48.4] Jonathan Rauch:** Jeff, if I may, there's a rabbi right here in Northern Virginia, Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation Michael Holzman is working in that synagogue and also now extending this to other synagogues. A program that integrates the great texts of America, such as the founding documents, but also Emma Lazarus poem, with the teaching of Torah side by side in small groups. People are hungry for these kinds of spaces and these kinds of conversations. And both the parties, this is what Julian and I have in common. We've neglected our institutions as a country. We've become so individualistic. And we took parties for granted when they worked, which they did for quite a while. And we took faith for granted when it worked, which it did for quite a while. And now we've got to think about repairing that neglect. And a lot of the good news is a lot of work is happening at the grassroots level. There's a real hunger, especially among younger people. They don't know how to do institutions. It's a foreign language to them. So you've all said they're hungry for it, but they don't know what they're hungry for. But resuscitating these institutional structures, I think that's in fact what a lot of this appetite really is.

**[00:54:04.0] Jeffrey Rosen:** So crucial civic education is such an important part of it. And this is why the NCC is so excited, leading up to America's 250, to convene these civic conversations in churches, in synagogues, in local bookstores, as well as at historic sites about the principles of the American idea. We're creating a new interactive Declaration of Independence with America's leading historians writing about the principles of liberty, equality, government by consent, and

are so looking forward to taking it around the country to convene these meaningful conversations, which really do represent what you call, Jonathan, the need for spiritual formation, which is really at the core of the solution. Jonathan, just one more word about how you say the work of Christian revival and spiritual formation requires at least two elements, teaching by pastors and a civic theology they could teach, teach. What would that civic theology look like?

**[00:55:13.7] Jonathan Rauch:** Well, I think it looks like the teaching of Jesus, don't be afraid, imitate Jesus and forgive each other. Those things translate very well into modern politics as principles, which, if all of us, not just Christians, adhered to, would expand the space to get along together in politics. Just don't always be in a fearful crouch when you approach politics. And Remember to treat everyone with decency and civility, no matter how strongly you disagree. And remember that politics is not about retribution. It's about solving problems and learning to live with each other. And if we just do that, it's right there in the Bible.

**[00:57:00.0] Jeffrey Rosen:** Beautiful. Beautiful. And that leads David Loeb to say, "Wow, I never thought I would leave this conversation with any optimism for the future". Thank you. Thank you indeed, Jonathan Rauch and Julian Zelizer for a deep, complicated and ultimately optimistic conversation about the possibility of a spiritual and institutional revival around the liberal principles of the American idea, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which unites both. I'm just moved to share the thoughts of John Quincy Adams on the jubilee of The Constitution, the 50th anniversary of Washington's inauguration. He fears civil war and the polarization is so intense that violence seems on the horizon. And he says the one thing that will save us is adherence to these principles of the Declaration and the Constitution. So urgently important that he quotes the book of Deuteronomy and says, "Take these principles as frontlets between your eyes, place them upon your doorposts, bind them upon your hands and your arm, whisper them to your children before you sleep". Make them the principles of your political salvation. And that's exactly what we have to do. And Jonathan and Julian have so powerfully illuminated the deep compatibility of spiritual and liberal principles at the core of the American idea.

**[00:57:18.2] Jeffrey Rosen:** Jonathan, Julian, thank you so much for joining. Thanks to all for listening. See you soon. This episode was perfectly produced by Samson Mostashari and Bill Pollock. It was engineered by Bill Pollock and David Stotz. Research was provided by Yara Daraiseh, Gyuha Lee, Samson Mostashari, and Cooper Smith. Please recommend the show to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of constitutional debate. Sign up for the newsletter at [constitutioncenter.org/connect](https://constitutioncenter.org/connect) and always remember that the National Constitution Center is a private nonprofit. Despite that inspiring Congressional charter, we fortunately at the moment receive little congressional money and therefore we rely on the general ferocity of people like you across the country who are inspired by our nonpartisan



mission of constitutional education and debate. Please consider supporting efforts by donating today at [constitutioncenter.org/donate](https://constitutioncenter.org/donate). On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Jeffrey Rosen.