

# The Winter Solstice: A Time for Reflection and Review

By Dan Sapone

“The Winter Solstice has always been special to me, as a barren darkness that gives birth to a verdant future, a time of pain and withdrawal that produces something joyful, like a monarch butterfly extracting itself from its cocoon.”

— Gary Zukav

“The Romans, like other [ancient] nations, had nature festivals celebrating the death of winter to the life of spring — the Winter Solstice, featuring the giving of presents, the lighting of a huge log, and the burning of candles.”

—Samuel L. Jackson



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## New Realities Are Emerging

Perhaps, it is the time of year: The Winter Solstice — the shortest day of the year. Since ancient times, the days between about November 21st and the new year have signaled a time for review and thoughtful reflection. While I have *tried* over the past year to avoid writing about our corrosive politics, a few writers and a couple of thoughtful voices have offered a more dignified and insightful approach to our politics than we have seen elsewhere in the media. So, I thought I'd give it a try. Two writers are worth a look:

- Steve Israel wrote a column for CNN online called [“Forget red vs blue states, this is the real battle in America”](#)
- David Brooks wrote a piece in the New York Times on Nov.9 with the strange title, [“The Existing Democratic Majority”](#)

(Click on the titles above for links to the original articles.)

Let me briefly extract the ideas that made me sit up and take notice.

1. In “Forget Red vs Blue,” Steve Israel makes a dramatic assertion: that the political divisions that became familiar to us during the Bush and Obama years have been utterly disrupted. For years now, we had come to understand that all political issues and government decisions revolved around the divide between Red States and Blue States. Regions dominated by Republicans supported a predictable array of policies and attitudes. Likewise, those dominated by Democrats also supported largely predictable positions. With very little overlap, decisions came down to vote counts along that divide. His analysis — today two very different groupings have emerged by which decisions are likely to be made. We can call them “parties” if we want; but the designations “Democrat” and “Republican” no longer adequately define them. Some call it a struggle between “populists” and “the establishment”; but those labels don't tell the whole story either. Steve Israel described them this way:
  - a. [“The Normicon Party”](#) consists of people from both traditional parties who favor respect for civility, stable institutions, and recognized ethical expectations. **Normicons** try to subordinate immediate emotion to long-held principles. Using a sports analogy, for them, politics is like boxing: “They may not watch it, but they understand the point of its rules, referees, and judges.” They prefer to *maintain* what most would recognize as “norms.”

- b. “The Denormocrat Party” embraces strength through attack, assaults on institutions, and the flouting of rules and regulations (i.e., “De-norming”). Denormocrats are willing to suspend long-held ethical expectations for short-term emotional gain. For them, politics is like cage fighting: “They may not watch it, but they identify with its full contact and minimalist rules.” They prefer to *discard* what most people recognize as “norms.”

**Normicons** see stability through order. **Denormocrats** seek salvation through disorder.

A number of writers have used words like the following (from Ezra Klein) to describe the 2016 election: “In the recent past, our divisions have been Democrats *versus* Republicans, liberals *versus* conservatives, left *versus* right. But not this election.” This campaign is not merely a choice between the Democratic and Republican parties, but between *normal political* parties and an emerging *abnormal* one.

2. David Brooks, in [his column on Nov. 9th](#), proposed another way to understand the emerging American political landscape. He suggested that the “*Republican vs Democrat*” divide is being replaced with something different. Voters are starting to sort themselves into two groups that he calls “*Somewheres*” and “*Anywheres*.” “*Somewheres*” are people whose values and priorities are rooted in their location — like “Virginia farmers,” “West Virginia Coal Miners,” or “Pennsylvania steelworkers.” These Americans tend to live in rural areas, they tend to stay put, they are often uncomfortable with cultural change, and they tend to vote Republican. The bad news for them is that, in many of these rural areas, the steel mills and coal mines are gone or declining and are not quickly being replaced by industries that require similar skills. But, the people remain — perhaps because they don’t have the skills or the will to move. *Anywheres*, on the other hand, value educational opportunities; they move to the cities where their skills and education are in demand, and as a result are more likely to feel comfortable with diversity and cultural change. If employment opportunities change, they tend to move to get a better job. *Anywheres* tend to vote Democrat.
  - a. Until recently, this trend kept a political balance because, while the cities tended to vote Democrat and rural counties voted Republican, the suburbs were divided and provided the balance (aka gridlock) of recent years. BUT TODAY, the growing suburbs are no longer divided. As Brooks put it: the suburbs “are ‘*Anywhere*’ all the way through.” This has suddenly begun to play out in local special elections: Loudon County (went Demo 60-40) and Fairfax County (67-31) are examples. The outcome of the recent Alabama Senate election may be viewed in that category. Northern Virginia’s Bailey’s Crossroads recently experienced an influx of information-age workers and ethnic restaurants. → This is new.
  - b. As a result, the political map is being redrawn. Brooks’ observation, borne out by other analysts, is that Trump supporters are not at home on this new playing field. He writes, “Populism has made the Republicans a rural party and given the Democrats everything else.” The data shows that, in Virginia’s recent example, “Democrats won by a landslide among anybody who grew up in the age of globalization. Among voters aged 18-29, they won by 69-30 percent. Among voters 30-44, they won by 61-37 percent.” He goes on, “The stain Trump leaves on the G.O.P. will take some time to wash away. But it is bigger than Trump; it’s an alignment caused by the fundamental reality of the populist movement.



- c. **BUT**, does this translate into a Democratic dominance? “Not so fast,” he says. The Democratic Party has not reached this opportunity as a result of a winning strategy. This is happening because “the Republicans have decided to shrink their coalition.” Brooks predicts that, if Democrats bet their future on their relationships with wealthy donors, they’ll give it all back. On the other hand, “if they focus on geographic, social, and economic mobility, the age of Democratic dominance will be at hand.”

## What to Expect

Notice that the writers we have examined didn’t conclude their work by telling us what the outcome will be. They did a thoughtful job of describing the conditions; but the outcome is yet to be determined. So, as with so many other elements of the nation’s future, here in the age of Trump, we’ll have to wait and see. It might be easy to assume that 2018 will return to what we have come to think of as “the natural political order.” But, there are reasons to be skeptical. At around inauguration time this year, a number of writers (notably [Chris Cillizza, quoted](#) below from the Washington Post,) have been writing things like this: “Trump’s ascension to the White House feels more like the beginning of something than the end of it to me. The instability of our long-standing institutions, coupled with the creeping anxiety ... and a sense that the American Dream is fading away, creates a political climate in which nontraditional politicians promising the world hold massive appeal. In short: I think we’ll see more Trump-like figures in politics, not less. And that a return to some sort of ‘normal’ never really comes.”

So, if these writers, and others, are right, we may have reached a time when “normal,” as we have come to understand it, is a thing of the past. Our two most recent former presidents have expressed that view recently and emphatically.



**In recent speaking engagements on the same day,  
Presidents Bush and Obama reminded us: “This is not normal.”**

Here’s what else they said:

“Bullying and prejudice in our public life sets a national tone, provides permission for cruelty and bigotry, and compromises the moral education of children.”

— **George W. Bush, October 19, 2017**

“What we can’t have is the same old politics of division that we have seen so many times before that dates back centuries. Some of the politics we see now, we thought we had put that to bed.”

— **Barrack Obama, October 19, 2017**

## So What?

Now, before we panic, all of this analysis doesn’t have to be a harbinger of doom. It might be that, but it *could* be an opportunity for America to reshape itself into a different future. Let’s not forget that such “reshapings” have happened before — some with positive results and some not so much — the 1860s, the 1910s/20s, the 1940s, the 1960s, the 1980s, are examples. Those who

were paying attention during those times (and writing about it) have told us that the outcomes were not easily predictable nor were they easily controllable by those in power. But one lesson to be learned from all of that history is that those who care enough to participate can have an influence on the direction America will take. Those who simply stand and watch, will probably be surprised at how unimportant their views were. As the Winter Solstice reminds us that the world is ready to remake itself once again, those who try to influence the outcome, especially in concert with others, may be surprised at how much influence is possible. → This is not new.

## **And Now?**

So, after the “reflection and review” that the Winter Solstice evokes, does the coming sunlight bring with it a call for action? But what kind of action and by whom? In a Democracy, we are told that our voices are the most effective tools. And in a Republic, we select representatives to increase the reach and volume of our voices. So, it would make sense to let those representatives know what kind of action we intend.

Some sample pathways:

<https://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/>

<https://www.harris.senate.gov/contact/>

<https://swalwell.house.gov/>

<https://govapps.gov.ca.gov/gov39mail/>

Finally, I'd like to cite two more writers who have offered useful advice for this time. One is poet Annie Finch, the author of “[Winter Solstice Chant](#).” In an interview, she reminds us of the two-step process of moving from darkness to light: “If you don't experience the darkness fully, then you are not going to appreciate the light.” The other — a well-known and eloquent gentleman advised us once to “become the change we seek.” Might be worth a try in the new year.

