

The Symmetry Test

Imagine a rule. A procedure. A power.

Now imagine your side loses the next election.

Do you still want that rule to exist?

That question is the whole test.

The symmetry test asks: would you accept this if the roles were reversed — if the other side held the power, set the precedent, or paid the cost instead of you?

If the answer changes depending on who's holding the pen, the rule was never really a principle. It was a tactic wearing a principle's clothes.

Precedents Don't Stay in One Party's Hands

Washington runs on precedent. A tactic used once becomes a tool available to whoever holds power next.

Changing the filibuster rules to pass something popular feels different when your party controls the chamber than when it doesn't — but the rule itself doesn't know which party is using it. Once changed, it's changed for whoever wins next time too.

Expanding executive power to move faster on a priority you care about sets the same expanded power on the desk of the next president — including the one you didn't vote for.

Restricting a court's jurisdiction, changing how judges are confirmed, adjusting how votes are certified — every one of these becomes a tool sitting on a shared table. It doesn't disappear when your side steps away from it.

The symmetry test isn't about whether the tactic is currently justified. It's about whether you'd still call it justified after your opponents pick it up and use it on you.

A Test, Not a Verdict

This doesn't mean every rule change is wrong, or that precedent should freeze government in place forever. Institutions do need to adapt, and sometimes a real problem justifies a real change.

The test isn't "never change anything." The test is honesty about what you're actually defending.

If you can say, genuinely, "I would want this rule to exist even if my opponents were the ones using it" — that's a defensible position, whatever it is.

If the honest answer is "I only want this because it helps us right now," that's worth knowing about yourself before you go defend it in public as a matter of principle.

Where This Gets Uncomfortable

The symmetry test is easiest to apply to the other side. It's much harder — and much more useful — turned on our own.

It's uncomfortable to ask whether a norm we're currently benefiting from is one we'd still support losing to. It's uncomfortable to notice that some of our strongest objections to what "they" did quietly disappeared when "we" did something similar.

That discomfort isn't a sign the test is broken. It's a sign the test is working.

Power that only respects limits when it's inconvenient for the other side isn't really respecting limits at all.

Before defending a tactic, a rule, or a use of power — try running it through the other jersey first.

If it still holds up, it was probably principle.

If it doesn't, it was probably just an advantage — and it's worth being honest about which one it was.