

Tribe vs. Issue

Ask most people whether they favor cutting the deficit, and they'll say yes.

Ask them to name a specific program they'd cut to do it, and the conversation changes.

This isn't hypocrisy. It's how tribal thinking works. We hold the position our side holds, in the form our side holds it — general enough to feel principled, vague enough to never cost us anything.

Tribe vs. issue is a simple test: are you reacting to who is saying something, or to what is actually being said?

The Deficit, Depending on Who's Talking

For decades, federal deficits have functioned less like a fiscal problem and more like a seasonal costume.

When the other party holds the White House and deficits rise, they become an emergency — a threat to our children's future, a sign of reckless governance, proof of a party that cannot be trusted with the nation's finances.

When our own party holds the White House and deficits rise for different reasons — tax cuts instead of spending, defense instead of entitlements — the argument quietly changes. Deficits become a secondary concern. Growth will handle it. The math is different this time. Serious people don't obsess over numbers.

Neither version of this argument is really about deficits.

Both are about defending the team currently in possession of the ball.

If a deficit under a Republican president alarms you, does a similar deficit under a Democratic president alarm you the same amount? If deficit spending on infrastructure troubles you, does deficit spending on tax cuts trouble you too — or only one of them?

The honest answer, for most of us, most of the time, is that it depends on the jersey.

Why This Matters More Than It Seems

This isn't a call to have no opinion on deficits, spending, or taxes. Reasonable people disagree about the right levels of each, and those disagreements are legitimate — genuinely a matter of values and priorities, not a matter of one side being obviously right.

The problem isn't disagreement. The problem is when the position moves with the team instead of staying still and letting the team move past it.

Because if our reaction to a fact depends entirely on who benefits from it politically, we're no longer actually evaluating the fact. We're managing a scoreboard.

And a citizenry that only tracks scoreboards can be led almost anywhere — because the specific policy stops mattering. Only the win does.

A Question Worth Asking Before the Next Headline

The next time a number, a scandal, or a policy outcome makes you angry — or makes you shrug — try asking:

Would I feel this way if my side had done it?

If the answer is yes, the reaction is probably about the issue.

If the answer is no, the reaction is probably about the tribe.

Neither answer makes you a bad citizen. It makes you human — tribal instincts are ancient, and they aren't going anywhere. But naming the instinct is the first step toward not being governed by it.

We the People are supposed to be the check on power.

A check that only activates against the other team isn't a check at all.

It's just a delay.