

**The Upshot**  
THE 2016 RACE

# American Anger: It's Not the Economy. It's the Other Party.

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Americans are angry. That's the sentiment that many believe is driving the 2016 election. They are angry because the rich are getting richer, the average guy is struggling and the government in Washington hasn't done anything to stop the trend.

But it may not be that simple.

Data on the nation's economic recovery, people's reactions to current economic conditions and their overall sense of satisfaction with life do not suggest Americans are angry. In fact, historical measures indicate people are about as happy and satisfied with the economy and with their lives as they were in 1983, when Ronald Reagan told us it was "morning again in America."

So why does it feel more like a 1 a.m. bar brawl?

The answer may have more to do with political parties than economics, or at least with the interaction of the two. Today's voters have sorted themselves and polarized into partisan groups that look very different than they did in the late 1980s. And members of each side like the other side less than before. Americans aren't annoyed only by the economy; they're annoyed with one another.

Objective economic conditions measured by the Federal Reserve suggest that the nation's recovery began in 2010, when gross domestic product started to expand, unemployment started to fall and real disposable income began to increase. By 2015, the misery index — a combined measure of unemployment and inflation — was about as low as it had been since the 1950s, meaning an active demand for goods and services along with low unemployment and inflation.

Most Americans seemed to appreciate this growth. Data on the Index of Consumer Sentiment, one of the longest-running measures of Americans' views of the economy, shows that by the end of 2015, consumer sentiment was as positive as it had been in the mid-2000s and mid-1980s. It was nearly identical to where it was at the end of 1983, when Mr. Reagan's re-election romp began to take shape.

Even breaking the consumer sentiment data down by income levels does little to buoy the argument that Americans were pessimistic. From 2009-2015, the average gap in economic satisfaction between the upper

and lower thirds of the income distribution was 13.7 points, much lower than it was during the Reagan years (21.3) and lower than the gap during the administrations of the elder George Bush (14.7), Bill Clinton (16.7) and George W. Bush (18.4).

As we entered 2016, Americans of all income levels felt positively about the economy, though by some indicators many people had not recovered. The employment-population ratio and median household income, for example, began to recover only in 2015.

To get a sense of whether these economic factors were affecting the general mood of the nation in a way not captured by consumer sentiment, I examined one of the longest-standing measures of general happiness. Since 1972, the General Social Survey has asked people to “take things all together” and rate their level of happiness. The 40-year trend shows only modest changes — and may actually suggest a small increase in happiness in recent years.

Describing Americans’ mood as distinctively angry in 2015 elides this evidence. Americans were optimistic about the nation’s economy and generally happy — in fact, no less optimistic or happy than they had been historically.

But there was a sense in the fall and winter of 2015 of one change. Using analytic tools provided by Crimson Hexagon, I calculated the average monthly increase in the share of news articles about the 2016 election with the word “angry.” Between November 2015 and March 2016, the share of stories about angry voters increased by 200 percent.

Some evidence suggests that the ire came from politics. When asked by pollsters about trusting the government, the direction of the country, American progress or the president, Americans were gloomier than their economic assessments might have predicted. Broken out by party, these pessimistic views reveal a growing partisan divide, one that’s been distilling around racial attitudes for nearly two decades.

The increasing alignment between party and racial attitudes goes back to the early 1990s. The Pew Values Survey asks people whether they agree that “we should make every effort to improve the position of minorities, even if it means giving them preferential treatment.”

Over time, Americans’ party identification has become more closely aligned with answers to this question and others like it. Pew reports that, “since 1987, the gap on this question between the two parties has doubled — from 18 points to 40 points.” Democrats are now much more supportive (52 percent) of efforts to improve racial equality than they were a few decades ago, while the views of Republicans have been largely unchanged (12 percent agree).

That Democrats and Republicans have different views on issues is not surprising. But recent work by Stanford University’s Shanto Iyengar and his co-authors shows something else has been brewing in the electorate: a growing hostility toward members of the opposite party. This enmity, they argue, percolates into opinions about everyday life.

Partisans, for example, are more concerned that their children might marry someone of the opposite party (vs. people in Britain today and the United States in 1960). They found partisans surprisingly willing to discriminate against people who are not members of their political party. We’ve entered an age of party-ism.

Writing in *The Washington Post*, Michael Tesler, a University of California, Irvine, political scientist, explained that because the growing partisan divide is partly fueled by racial attitudes, partisans (in Washington and in the electorate) also take increasingly opposite positions on many racially inflected controversies.

Some are political, like police misconduct. Others spill into areas we think of as more social than political, like sports, music and movies: about Academy Awards nominations, for example.

Democrats and Republicans like each other a lot less now than they did 60 years ago, in part because they have sorted into parties based on attitudes on race, religion and ethnicity. These attitudes and emotions have been activated in the lead-up to the 2016 election. Add to this the fact that the country is becoming less white and that nonwhites are disproportionately more likely to be Democrats, and an explanation for the anger emerges.

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