

Post Nation

Why party identity causes voters to stand behind their politicians – no matter what

By [Emily Guskin](#) and [Vanessa Williams](#) December 12 at 1:23 PM

About US is a new initiative by The Washington Post to cover issues of identity in the United States. Look for the About US newsletter launching this winter.

Political party affiliation is more than a label that people carry with them into the voting booth on Election Day. People see political parties as part of others' personal identities and as affecting how they live their lives.

A Pew Research Center survey this past summer showed widening divisions between Democrats and Republicans over a range of issues, such as race, immigration and the environment. But the divide goes deeper than political matters.

A Washington Post-University of Maryland poll this fall found that at least half of Americans believe that a person's political party represents "how they live their lives." And a study by a Stanford University political scientist suggested that party affiliation is stronger than race, religion or ethnicity, especially in the country's increasingly polarized political culture.

"People acquire their party attachment before they go to kindergarten," Shanto Iyengar, a professor of communication and political science at Stanford, said in an interview. "More than 85 percent of households have the same party registration. If you're living with someone of a different party registration, that's a divorce just waiting to happen."

The intensity of Americans' party attachment has been evident in the response to accusations of sexual misconduct mounting

against male politicians, in which both voters and party leaders have routinely rejected or excused those aimed at politicians in their own party. Many Republican voters have said they will stand behind Republican candidate Roy Moore in the Alabama special election today because of his party, despite allegations that he pursued or sexually touched teenage girls as young as 14 when he was an assistant district attorney.

“Party attachment is so strong that people are willing to overlook almost any liability in their candidates,” Iyengar said.

The Post-U-Md. survey found that tendency to judge a person by their party is similar when considering Democrats and Republicans. Half of Americans said that if they knew someone was a Democrat, that also represents how they live their lives, while 54 percent said knowing someone is a Republican indicates their way of life. Combining both questions, 4 in 10 Americans said that being either a Republican or a Democrat represents how you live your life.

The view may not be meant as a criticism. Just over half of people identifying with each party, 53 percent of Democrats and 51 percent of Republicans, said that knowing someone is a member of their preferred political party represents how they live their lives. This view was even marginally higher among those with stronger party ties — 59 percent of strong Democrats said identifying with that party represents how a person lives, while 58 percent of Republicans said the same of their co-partisans.

In the Pew study, based on surveys of more than 5,000 adults conducted during the summer, Republicans and Democrats had sharply different views on government and some political issues — differences that grew wider during former president Barack Obama’s eight-year tenure and have grown wider still during President Trump’s first year in office. But Republicans and Democrats had more in common when it comes to some personal lifestyle activities, said Carroll Doherty, Pew’s director of political research.

“On some measures, like volunteering, the differences were very small — 54 percent of Democrats said they like to do this “a lot” as did 50% of Republicans,” Doherty said via email. “Similar with numbers who said they enjoyed exercising a lot — 53% of Reps, 51% of Dems.”

But, he added, there were “big differences on enjoying hunting and sport shooting (37% of Republicans, 12% of Democrats said they liked this a lot) and going to museums (61% of Democrats, 46% of Republicans),” he wrote.

The Pew survey also noted a big difference in the types of communities that party loyalists say they would like to live in: 65 percent of Republicans and those who lean Republican say they prefer neighborhoods with large houses, spaced farther apart, with schools, stores and restaurants miles away. By contrast, 61 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaners prefer smaller houses, closer together, with schools, retail and dining within walking distance.

Iyengar’s observations come from a his research examining political party identification in the United States, it looked at political party identification in Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom, using a survey of 4,000 adults. Among Americans, Iyengar said, there was a stronger identification with political parties and harsher judgment toward those in the opposing political parties.

“People are more likely to discriminate against their [partisan] opponents,” he said. “In this day and age, people are quite

concerned about engaging in proper behavior. They don't want to say bad things about women, about the elderly, about minorities. They say we should treat people in an egalitarian manner. But when it comes to political party, you don't have those norms and you feel free to say whatever you like."

This type of strong party identification, he said, is what has allowed some politicians to survive questions about racism, sexism and other major character deficits.

"President Trump put his finger on this phenomenon when he said, 'I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and it wouldn't make a difference,' " Iyengar said, referring to one of Trump's most memorable boasts to explain his popularity with GOP voters despite sundry controversies during last year's Republican primary.

"And he was correct," Iyengar added.

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