Should taxes on households making $250,000 or more a year be raised? When you ask Democrats this question, you get a very interesting answer: Those on the bottom of the income distribution appear to want lower taxes on high earners than those on the top do.

Among Democrats making less than $30,000, 48 percent say yes; among those making more than $75,000, 68 percent do, according to data provided to The Times by Bridget Johnson of the Pew Research Center. Among Democrats with high school degrees, 48 percent say yes; among those with college degrees, it’s 71 percent.

Separately, John Sides, a political scientist at George Washington University, found in a January 2018 YouGov survey that 87 percent of Democrats from households making more than $120,000 annually support a tax hike on rich households.

Two questions present themselves: Why are well-off Democrats the most supportive of policies seemingly adverse to their own interests? And, most important, how reliable is elite support for this redistributive agenda?

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The politics of economic self-interest that underpinned the New Deal era have been supplanted by “expressive partisanship,” a form of “affective polarization,” as political scientists put it.
What does this mean?

“A distinctly social type of polarization that includes political prejudice, anger, enthusiasm, and activism” has superseded political conflict over issues, Lilliana Mason of the University of Maryland, argues in her new book, “Uncivil Agreement”:

An electorate that increasingly treats its political opponents as enemies, with ever-growing levels of prejudice, offensive action, and anger, is a clear sign of partisan polarization occurring within the citizenry. If issue positions do not follow precisely this pattern of behavioral polarization, it does not make those increasingly tribal partisan interactions irrelevant.

Mason elaborated in an email: “The more highly educated also tend to be more strongly identified along political lines.” And the depth of their education plays a role:

Political knowledge tends to increase the effects of identity as more knowledgeable people have more informational ammunition to counter argue any stories they don’t like.

In a 2016 study, the Pew Research Center found that not only are American voters developing increasingly consistent conservative or liberal positions, but that

Much of the growth in ideological consistency has come among better educated adults — including a striking rise in the share who have across-the-board liberal views, which is consistent with the growing share of postgraduates who identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party.

In “Uncivil Agreement,” Mason contends that “an increasing portion of the American electorate is driven by identity-centric motivations.” And she explains it, “We are acting because our emotions and the self-esteem that is driven by our identities compel us to do something.”

The attitudes and beliefs of individual voters

cannot compel the same sort of activism that our simple sense of social connection can. We take political action, potentially making real political changes, because we feel close to particular groups of people and want them (and therefore ourselves) to be winners.

In this view, the strength of a voter’s identity as a Democrat or Republican drives political engagement more than personal gain. Better educated voters more readily form “identity
centric” political commitments to their party of choice, which goes a long way toward explaining the strength of liberal convictions among more affluent Democrats.

In a recent paper, “Education is Related to Greater Ideological Prejudice,” P.J. Henry and Jaime L. Napier, psychology professors at NYU-Abu Dhabi, argue that we are exchanging one type of bias for another — that while “education is related to decreases in interethnic/interracial prejudice,” it simultaneously leads “to increases in ideological — liberal vs. conservative — prejudice.”

Henry and Napier examined American National Election Studies survey data from 1964 to 2012 and found that prejudice against the opposition party increased both with education and with the extremity of partisanship, as the accompanying chart demonstrates.

At the same time, these “expressive” or “identity centric” partisans with college degrees have a stronger and more intense emotional investment in the outcome of elections than partisans motivated by their position on the socioeconomic ladder.

Expressive partisanship, in effect, allows the most committed to override their own circuitry and support policies antithetical to their economic interests.

“The behavior, attitudes, and convictions of strongly identified Democrats and Republicans will be driven by their political group membership,” David Rast, a professor of psychology at the University of Alberta, wrote by email:

> The issue at hand will be more or less irrelevant — that is, the issue will likely only come into play when it’s a core group position (e.g., Dems being pro-choice and Reps being pro-life).

Rast added:

> Outside of these few core issues, there is a small body of research showing Dems will support a Rep position on a specific issue if they think their stance is supported by their group’s leadership or by their group’s norms.

In a 2015 paper, “Expressive Partisanship: Campaign Involvement, Political Emotion, and Partisan Identity,” Leonie Huddy and Lene Aarøe, political scientists at Stony Brook University and Aarhus University in Denmark, writing with Mason, advanced the
argument that

Generating anger at the opposing side is a highly effective way to elicit political engagement and action from those with expressive partisan concerns.

Huddy and her colleagues

come down firmly on the side of expressive partisanship as the primary driver of campaign involvement, especially in close elections when the threat of electoral loss looms large. These are the circumstances in which victory or defeat is most palpable and status loss or gain most obvious and dramatic.

Mason, in a paper released last month, “Ideologues Without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities,” puts this point succinctly: “Identity does not require values and policy attitudes,” she writes. Instead, it simply requires “a sense of inclusion and a sense of exclusion.”

Identification as a liberal and conservative, Mason argues, confers

a sense of group identity that is not neatly connected to any set of issue positions, but nonetheless motivates political judgment. These effects of identity-based ideology on political evaluations are psychological and emotional, and help explain how “liberals” and “conservatives” may dislike each other for reasons unconnected to their opinions.

In contrast to issue and principle-based ideology, Mason calls this “identity-based ideology.” As a result,

liberals and conservatives are distancing themselves from one another on behalf of their identity-related feelings about who is “in” and who is “out.”

The intensity of this emotional commitment to political parties was measured by three scholars, Lamar Pierce of Washington University in St. Louis, Todd Rogers, of Harvard’s Kennedy School, and Jason A. Snyder, of American University.

In their 2015 paper, “Losing Hurts: The Happiness Impact of Partisan Electoral Loss,” the authors found that the grief of Republican partisans after their party lost the presidential election in 2012 was twice that of “respondents with children” immediately after “the Newtown shootings” and “respondents living in Boston” after “the Boston Marathon
bombings.”

This gets us to the big question.

How firm is the commitment of the Democratic Party to an agenda that shifts benefits to those on the bottom half of the economic distribution when one of its most committed constituencies is the comparatively affluent who are motivated by “psychological and emotional” concerns and “feelings about who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’”?  

Matthew D. Luttig, a political scientist at Colgate, made the case in his 2016 dissertation, “The Rise of Partisan Rigidity,” that,

elite polarization has strengthened the relationship between a basic psychological motivation for group membership — the need for certainty — and partisan strength, in-party favoritism, out-party derogation, and conformity to group leaders. Because the need for certainty is a form of motivated closed-mindedness, I argue that the American electorate today is increasingly composed of rigid partisans: partisans who are uncritically extremist, biased, and intolerant.

I asked Luttig how reliable upscale Democrats will be if the party regains control of Congress and seeks to enact legislation that threatens the financial or social status of the upper middle class. He replied:

Many well-educated affluent Democrats will stay loyal even if the Democratic Party adopts economic and racially redistributive policies. There are two main reasons for this: (1) narrow economic self-interest has always been a relatively weak predictor of policy preferences relative to other symbolic considerations, so many well-educated affluent Democrats might very well support these types of redistributive programs, and (2) today’s era of partisanship is uniquely characterized by extreme dislike of the opposite party.

He then added, “affective partisanship does seem to be powerful glue holding the parties together in spite of some internal disagreements.”

The very depth of the personal and emotional commitment of well-educated liberals to their identity as Democrats may prove to be a powerful enough force to keep them loyal to the party even under duress.
Yphtach Lelkes, a professor of communications at the University of Pennsylvania, reported with two co-authors in a 2017 paper that partisan “cue receptivity is highest among people with both a strong social identification with their party and high cognitive resources,” which, on the left, translates to liberals with college degrees.

Shanto Iyengar, a political scientist at Stanford who has done research on the subject of “affect toward copartisans and opposing partisans”, presents a more complicated picture. In an email, Iyengar wrote:

identity politics makes Democrats and Republicans whose preferences on the issues are at odds with their party platform misperceive the party position so as to minimize dissonance. In other cases, the discrepancy may be acknowledged, but ignored.

Iyengar pointed out that

Trump and the Republicans targeted the super-rich as the principal beneficiaries of their tax bill yet it does not seem to have hurt them with the downscale base.

At the same time, Iyengar observed, “when the stakes get raised” — as in the recent rejection by Democrats in the California State Senate of legislation that would have allowed affordable housing in middle-class neighborhoods — “things might be quite different and people may then live up to the expectations of rationality.”

In practical terms, most Democratic political leaders are risk averse. They are alert to the dangers of venturing onto policy terrain that threatens defections among any substantial constituency.

The Democratic Party’s upper-middle-class voters are highly effective in voicing their views, pro or con, on legislative and regulatory initiatives. Recent examples are the affordable housing fight in California I just mentioned, as well as the opposition by white parents on New York’s Upper West Side, many of them putatively liberal, to a proposal that would require 25 percent of the places in 17 local middle schools to be allocated to students who score below grade level on state tests.

In other words, the deep emotional commitment of college-educated liberals to the Democratic Party — their “expressive partisanship” — is both a boon and a constraint.
Can Democrats retain their new rich constituents without destroying the party’s mission?

Will affluent white liberals, whose expressive or affective partisan identification has been with the Democratic Party, continue to be steadfast members of the left coalition if they perceive imminent threats to their economic well-being, their property values, their children’s educational opportunities and their own relatively homogeneous neighborhoods?

These privileged voters are crucial to the party’s prospects in 2018 and 2020, but these same voters will severely test the ability of a hybrid and internally conflicted Democratic Party to govern “when the stakes get raised” — in particular if empowered Democrats try to address the politically hazardous but morally essential issues of racial justice and enduring economic inequality.

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