

Opinion | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER



Thomas B. Edsall MARCH 1, 2018



Damon Winter/The New York Times

Hostility to the opposition party and its candidates has now reached a level where loathing motivates voters more than loyalty.

The building strength of partisan antipathy — “negative partisanship” — has radically altered politics. Anger has become the primary tool for motivating voters. Ticket splitting is dying out. But perhaps the most important consequence of the current power of political anger is that there has been a

marked decline in the accountability of public officials to the electorate.

How bad is this problem? In “[The Strengthening of Partisan Affect](#),” [Shanto Iyengar](#) and [Masha Krupenkin](#), political scientists at Stanford, note that

We find that as animosity toward the opposing party has intensified, it has taken on a new role as the prime motivator in partisans’ political lives.

Iyengar and Krupenkin argue that

the impact of feelings toward the out-party on both vote choice and the decision to participate has increased since 2000; today it is out-group animus rather than in-group favoritism that drives political behavior.

Along parallel lines, [Alan Abramowitz](#) and [Steven Webster](#), political scientists at Emory University, argue that

one of the most important trends in American politics over the past several decades has been the rise of negative partisanship in the electorate.

In “[All Politics is National: The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. House and Senate Elections in the 21st Century](#),” Abramowitz and Webster make the case that

To a greater extent than at any time in the post-World War II era, the outcomes of elections below the presidential level reflect the outcomes of presidential elections. As a result, the famous comment by the late Tip O’Neill that “all politics is local” now seems rather quaint. In the 21st century United States, it increasingly appears that all politics is national.

The practice of voting against rather than for has grown steadily since the 2000 election, but it reached new heights in 2016, when both major party nominees were viewed substantially more negatively than positively.

On Nov. 7, 2016, the day before the election, 58.5 percent of voters had an unfavorable view of [Donald Trump](#) and 54.4 percent felt the same way about [Hillary Clinton](#), according to RealClearPolitics. Favorable views were 37.5 for Trump and 41.8 percent for Clinton.

Abramowitz and Webster compiled data from the 2012 and 2016 elections to show how much the level of anger among both Democratic and Republican voters increased over four years.

In 2012, 33 percent of Democrats and 43 percent of Republicans described themselves as angry at the opposing party's presidential candidate "most of the time" or "just about always." In 2016, the percentage of Democratic voters who said they were this angry at Trump rose to 73 percent, and the percentage of Republicans with that level of hostility toward Hillary Clinton rose to 66 percent.

This trend helps explain seemingly contradictory voter attitudes catalogued in both "All Politics is National" and a second Abramowitz-Webster paper, "[Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties but Behave like Rabid Partisans.](#)"

From one vantage point, the view of each major party has steadily worsened. As Abramowitz and Webster point out:

The percentage of Americans with favorable opinions of both parties is now the lowest it has been since the American National Election Studies began asking this question in 1978.

At the same time, "record numbers of voters in 2016 were dissatisfied with their own party's presidential nominee." Trump and Clinton

were the most unpopular major party candidates for president since the ANES introduced the feeling thermometer scale in 1968.

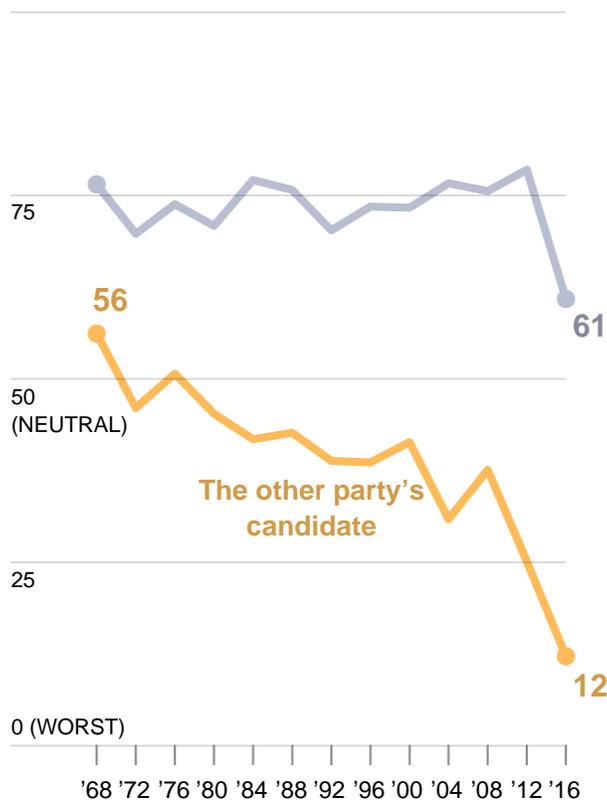
The "[feeling thermometer scale](#)" asks voters to rank candidates and institutions on a scale of 0 to 100, in which 100 is very warm or favorable, zero is very cold or unfavorable and 50 is neutral or no feeling.

The accompanying graphic shows that both Democrats and Republicans had favorable views of their own candidates from 1968 to 2012, ranging from 76.5 percent in 1968 to 78.5 percent in 2012. In 2016, however, with Trump and Clinton as the nominees, the thermometer rating dropped sharply to 60.9 percent.

The Political Winds: Chillier

A survey has tracked the average "temperature" rating given by voters of their own political party's presidential candidate and the opposing party's candidate since 1968.

100 (BEST)



By The New York Times | Source: Advances in Political Psychology

Over the same period, “feeling thermometer” ratings of the opposition candidate fell sharply, from 56.2 in 1968 to 25.1 in 2012. In 2016, the ratings of the opposition candidate plummeted to 12.2.

Despite the public’s increasingly adverse views of political parties, party loyalty in voting has now reached record levels, according to the two authors. Partisanship currently “has a stronger influence on vote choice than at any time since the 1950s.”

How can these conflicting trends be reconciled? Voters dislike the parties and are dissatisfied with their candidates, even as they cast straight-ticket ballots. This may sound inconsistent, but it’s not that hard to understand.

According to Abramowitz and Webster, in 2016, “large majorities of Democrats and Republicans truly despised the opposing party’s nominee.” Voters were motivated to go to the polls to cast ballots against the opposition’s nominee much more than to support their own party’s choice.

The key factor “in predicting party loyalty in the 2016 presidential election was how voters felt about the opposing party’s presidential candidate.”

Sign Up for the Opinion Today Newsletter

Every weekday, get thought-provoking commentary from Op-Ed columnists, the Times editorial board and contributing writers from around the world.

Sign Up

You agree to receive occasional updates and special offers for The New York Times's products and services.



I'm not a robot



reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

[SEE SAMPLE](#) | [MANAGE EMAIL PREFERENCES](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [OPT OUT OR CONTACT US ANYTIME](#)

In fact, Abramowitz and Webster found that “this measure was twice as important in predicting loyalty as feelings toward the candidate from one’s own party.” Partisan loyalty remained “very high because both Democratic and Republican identifiers overwhelmingly viewed the opposing party’s candidate with deep hostility.”

In the 1970s, about a quarter of all voters split their tickets, voting for presidential and congressional candidates of different parties. Now, not

even one in 10 does so. The result:

In 2016, all 34 Senate elections and 400 of 435 U.S. House elections were won by the party winning the presidential election in the state or district.

In their analysis of negative partisanship, Iyengar and Krupenkin argue that voting on the basis of hostility has an unexpected consequence: It lessens pressure on the winner to be accountable to his or her supporters, effectively freeing winners to thumb their noses at many of the voters who put them in office:

When citizens’ support for a candidate stems primarily from their strong dislike for the opposing candidate, they are less subject to the logic of accountability. Their psychic satisfaction comes more from defeating and humiliating the out-group, and less from any performance or policy benefits that might accrue from the victory of the in-party. For this group of voters, candidates have every incentive to inflame partisan negativity, further entrenching affective polarization.

By this logic, Iyengar and Krupenkin argue that

If partisans care less about their own party’s performance and instead focus on their distrust of the opposition party, elected officials no longer need

campaign on their own merits; instead, they have good reason to try even harder to denigrate the opposition.

In other words, Trump critics who anticipate a collapse of support when he fails to deliver on campaign promises are likely to be disappointed.

According to Iyengar and Krupenkin,

The primal sense of “us against them” makes partisans fixate on the goal of defeating and even humiliating the opposition at all costs. This negativity bias in voting behavior undermines traditional theories of electoral accountability that rest on incumbents’ ability to deliver policy and performance benefits.

Candidates and incumbents, Iyengar and Krupenkin continue, “are less likely to be sanctioned for demonstrating incompetence, dishonesty and unethical behavior.”

To make their point, the authors cite Roy Moore, the Republican candidate for Senate in Alabama last December, pointing out that under partisan conditions “a candidate accused of molesting teenage children is able to attract [91 percent](#) of the vote from his copartisans.”

What explains the extraordinary level of support for Moore, not only from Republican voters but also from the larger population of white Alabamians, at 68 percent, and conservatives, at 83 percent?

They can’t all have been happy with their candidate, but a partial answer can be found in a study published last month, “[One Tribe to Bind Them All: How Our Social Group Attachments Strengthen Partisanship](#),” by [Lilliana Mason](#) and [Julie Wronski](#), political scientists at the University of Maryland and the University of Mississippi.

The authors found that just as the Democratic Party is often described as a collection of identity groups, identity politics have also become a powerful force within the Republican Party. They argue, in fact, that “this effect is more powerful among Republicans than among Democrats, due to the general social homogeneity of the Republican Party,” with the result that “Republicans are more susceptible to identity-based politics.” For Republicans,

the general white, Christian conservative alliance with the party led to a far simpler categorization of who is in the group and who is outside of it.

Why would this lead to more willingness to vote for someone with as much baggage as Roy Moore? The convergence of voter identification with voters' social identity — conservative, white, Christian — “makes in-party preference more powerful and out-party tolerance ever more difficult.”

Put another way, Republican doubts about Roy Moore were superseded by hatred of the Democratic Party.

There is no sign that the growth in negative polarization will slow down, much less reverse itself. The dominant incentive in politics right now is to capitalize on animosity to the opposition party.

At a time when true swing voters have become a smaller and smaller share of the electorate, hatred, anger and animosity have proven the most effective tools to mobilize support.

By email, I asked Webster and Iyengar the following question: “Does negative partisanship override polarization on issues of race, sex, immigration, feminism, traditional family structure, LGBT issues, military spending and policy, etc.?”

Webster replied:

I'd be more inclined to say that negative partisanship has helped to perpetuate and exacerbate the degree of partisan polarization that we have in the U.S.

Iyengar contended that “affective divergence exceeds policy-related divergence.” A more “‘primal’ view of partisanship” has been gaining strength among social scientists, he wrote, noting the discovery

that children acquired a sense of party identification quite early in the life cycle without any “flickering awareness” of party differences on the issues. Moreover, as people moved through the life cycle, with corresponding changes in economic circumstances and interests, their sense of partisanship was unmoved despite considerable change in their stances on the issues.

President Trump's former chief strategist, Steve Bannon, [succinctly described](#) the role of negative partisanship in contemporary American politics during a January interview with Michael Lewis: “Anger and fear is

what gets people to the polls.”

The data support Bannon. The [Pew Research Center](#) found in June 2016 that the demonization — vilification — of political opponents has become entrenched:

Today, sizable shares of both Democrats and Republicans say the other party stirs feelings of not just frustration, but fear (56 percent of Democrats, 49 percent of Republicans) and anger (47 percent Democrats, 46 percent Republicans).

Not only do almost half of Republicans say Democrats are lazier than other Americans, more dishonest (45 percent), more closed-minded (52 percent) and more immoral (47 percent), most (59 percent) also say the members of their own party are more hard-working.

The Pew findings offer little comfort to those seeking concord. Some 70 percent of Democrats “say that Republicans are more closed-minded than other Americans.” Four out of ten Democrats say “Republicans are more dishonest,” and a third say Republicans are immoral and unintelligent.

As partisan conflict increasingly resembles guerrilla warfare, as political opponents despise each other as a matter of routine, the tactic of “enemy construction” takes root. A “friend-enemy” dichotomy gains strength. Opponents are demonized, defamed, delegitimated and dehumanized — “justifying the compromise of ordinarily recognized liberties” — in the words of RonNell Andersen Jones and Lisa Grow Sun in [“Enemy Construction and the Press.”](#)

In [“The Existential Need for Enemy”](#) György Csepeli, Zoltán Vági and Richárd Nagyfi write:

Each party holds negative, stereotypical images of the other stemming from the need to justify the deeds of hostility. The negative and simplified stereotypes are needed in order to simplify the conflict excluding discoveries of similarities between the groups in conflict. The individuals in intergroup conflict systematically tend to misperceive each other to accentuate differences. The resulting images tend to perpetuate negative stereotypes of each other containing oversimplified, inaccurate and derogatory beliefs concerning the other group that are identified as the enemies.

Just as adversaries are denigrated, allies are praised:

The image of self, in contrast, reflects glorification of everyone who is alike. A mirror image emerges in which each party sees the other one negatively and itself positively. On the basis of the overgeneralized difference stemming

from the categorization into in-group and out-group, the group members in each group necessarily will be pushed into the labyrinth of cognitive biases which are the cornerstones of the hostile image of the other.

As politics become a form of mortal combat, a strange burden falls on those who are most engaged. In the words of the conservative [German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt](#) — who as a supporter of the Third Reich knew something about hatred — the combatants must, as he wrote in “[The Theory of the Partisan](#),”

consider the other side as entirely criminal and inhuman, as totally worthless. Otherwise they are themselves criminal and inhuman. The logic of value and its obverse, worthlessness, unfolds its annihilating consequence, compelling ever new, ever deeper discriminations, criminalizations, and devaluations to the point of annihilating all of unworthy life.

It is not too much to say that a significant number of voters in both of America’s major political parties see their adversaries as worthless. And history teaches us that the logic of worthlessness has chilling implications.

I invite you to follow me on [Twitter, @Edsall](#).

Follow *The New York Times Opinion* section on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#), and sign up for the [Opinion Today newsletter](#).

NEWS

World

U.S.

Politics

N.Y.

Business