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Head Games

How to Counter the Forces Driving Political Polarization

Recent research helps explain our current political animus.

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America is a divided nation. Even though there's some debate about the degree to which Democrats and Republicans actually disagree on policy issues, in recent years the vitriol between people of opposing parties has steeply risen.

Both Democrats and Republicans see members of the other party as hypocritical, selfish, and close-minded. What's more, they don't even want to socialize with each other. Technically speaking, this is called affective polarization, and it refers to the animosity between people of opposing political parties.

In a recent paper, political scientist Shanto Iyengar of Stanford University and his collaborators traced the origins of affective polarization, its consequences, and steps we can take to mitigate it. The following is a selective summary of their work.

Affective polarization

Humans are naturally driven to be part of a group, and we derive a sense of self from our group identity. Identifying as a Democrat or Republican is a significant part of our identity, and tends to develop early in life.

As a function of instinct, when we identify with a political party we categorize our social world into an in-group (our party) or an out-group (the opposing party). Copious studies demonstrate that an in-group/out-group structure, even in trivial matters, conjures positive feelings for the in-group and negative feelings for the out-group. And the more strongly people identify with their political party, the more trenchant these divisions between Democrats and Republicans become.

The authors argue that affective polarization is a natural outgrowth of partisan group identity. People identify as Republicans or Democrats and see people belonging to their party in positive terms, and those belonging to the opposing party in negative terms.

The origins of affective polarization

The authors argue that in today's world, there are several factors that exacerbate this in-group vs. out-group dynamic.

First, the number of partisans who identify with the party that more closely matches their views has grown substantially. When you have a situation as we do in America, where most Democrats are liberals and most Republicans are conservatives, you will encounter less political and social conflict with those of your party and will see people of the other party as different from you. It is believed that this political self-sorting leads people to see those of their own party and the other party in more extreme terms.

Second, having more media outlets, including more partisan news outlets, is ramping up affective polarization. The thinking goes that partisan news activates partisan identities, in turn sparking heightened negativity towards those of the opposing party.

In addition, the imbalance of news content, as well as harsh portrayals of out-group members, may lead viewers to embrace more extreme political positions than they otherwise would, subsequently increasing affective polarization. Similarly, we may be more exposed to partisan content in both on- and offline discussions with those in our social networks.

Furthermore, political campaigns also stoke partisan acrimony, through advertising that often portrays the opposing party as a threat.

The consequences of affective polarization

Political partisanship has spilled over into our love lives. Partisanship is a method by which to screen romantic partners, which makes sense since political party has become a shorthand to signal one's views and values. Indeed, studies support that people tend to marry those who belong to their political party. One study even found that people might also find people of their own party as more physically attractive.

Similarly, in the sphere of friendship, socializing with those of the opposing party is less likely. Iyengar and his collaborators cite research which found that roughly 64% of Democrats and 55% of Republicans report they have “just a few” or “no” close friends who belong to the other political party.

How to improve relations between Democrats and Republicans

Iyengar and his co-authors make two recommendations to reduce the partisan discord that has overtaken our country:

First, research demonstrates that having the facts about party supporters can decrease animosity. The average person of both parties is a middle-aged, white, nonevangelical Christian, but this isn't who comes to mind when we think about Democrats and Republicans. Instead, we resort to partisan

stereotypes where Democrats are urban minorities and young people, and Republicans are older, wealthy, or evangelical Christians.

The authors point to research that demonstrates how wrongly we perceive political outgroups. For example, approximately 11% of Democrats belong to a labor union, but survey data found that the average American believes that 39% of Democrats were union members. Remarkably, 44% of Republicans and 37% of Democrats held this view, respectively. Similarly, a mere 2.2% of Republicans make more than \$250,000 per year, but the average person believed that 38% of Republicans had incomes that high.

Second, we could make an intentional effort to shift our attachment from our partisan identity to our common identity as Americans. Thus, instead of seeing each other in terms of in-group vs. out-group members, we could all belong to the same in-group. Thankfully, research shows that when we emphasize our commonality as Americans, it reduces the animus we have for those we believe oppose us.

References

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