



Sujet traité : Extrait d'un superbe livre sur la polarisation aux USA / Excerpt from a superb book on polarization in the USA

Source : Why we're polarized, Ezra Klein Date : 2020

"Political identity is fair game for hatred"

Shanto Iyengar is director of Stanford University's Political Communication Laboratory, and he had noticed something odd. In 1960, Americans were asked whether they would be pleased, displeased, or unmoved if their son or daughter married a member of the other political party. Respondents reacted with a shrug. Only 5 percent of Republicans and 4 percent of Democrats said they would be upset by the cross-party union. On the list of things you might care about in a child's partner—are they kind, smart, successful, supportive?—which political party they voted for just didn't rate.

Fast-forward to 2008. The polling firm YouGov asked Republicans and Democrats the same question—and got very different results. This time, 27 percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats said they would be upset if their son or daughter married a member of the opposite party. In 2010, YouGov asked the question again; this time, 49 percent of Republicans and 33 percent of Democrats professed concern at interparty marriage.

The numbers suggested to Iyengar that today's political differences were fundamentally different from yesterday's political differences; the nature of American political partisanship, he worried, was mutating into something more fundamental, and more irreconcilable, than what it had been in the past.

If he was right, then party affiliation wasn't simply an expression of our disagreements; it was also becoming the cause of them. If Democrats thought of other Democrats as their group and of Republicans as a hostile out-group, and vice versa, then the consequences would stretch far beyond politics—into things like, say, marriage.

And the data was everywhere. Polls looking at the difference between how Republicans viewed Democrats and how Democrats viewed Republicans now showed that partisans were less accepting of each other than white people were of black people or than black people were of white people.

But there was no way partisanship—an identity we choose and sometimes change—could possibly have become a cleavage in American life as deep as race, right? That seemed crazy. So Iyengar decided to test it.

The experiment was simple. Working with Dartmouth College political scientist Sean Westwood, Iyengar asked about a thousand people to decide between the résumés of two high school seniors who were competing for a scholarship. The résumés could differ in three ways: first, the senior could have either a 3.5 or 4.0 GPA; second, the senior could have been the president of the Young Democrats or Young Republicans club; third, the senior could have a stereotypically African American name and have been president of the African American Student Association or could have a stereotypically Caucasian name. The point of the project was to see whether political hostility affected a nonpolitical task and to compare the effect with race.

I've read a lot of studies in the course of researching this book, but this one still surprises me. When the résumé included a political identity cue, about 80 percent of Democrats and Republicans awarded the scholarship to their copartisan. This held true whether or not the copartisan had the higher GPA—when the Republican student was more qualified, Democrats chose him only 30 percent of the time, and when the Democrat was more qualified, Republicans chose him only 15 percent of the time.

That is a profound finding: when awarding a college scholarship—a task that should be completely nonpolitical—Republicans and Democrats cared more about the political party

of the student than the student's GPA. As Iyengar and Westwood wrote, "Partisanship simply trumped academic excellence."²⁶

Remarkably, in this study, partisanship even trumped race. When the candidates were equally qualified, about 78 percent of African Americans chose the candidate of the same race, as did 42 percent of white Americans. When the candidate of the other race had a higher GPA, 45 percent of African Americans chose him, as did 71 percent of white Americans.

Iyengar's hypothesis is that partisan animosity is one of the few forms of discrimination that contemporary American society not only permits but actively encourages. "Political identity is fair game for hatred," he says. "Racial identity is not. Gender identity is not. You cannot express negative sentiments about social groups in this day and age. But political identities are not protected by these constraints. A Republican is someone who chooses to be Republican, so I can say whatever I want about them."²⁷

You can see an example when you look at the media, Westwood observes. There are no major cable channels devoted to making people of other races look bad (though Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham get pretty close sometimes). But there are cable channels that are devoted to making members of the other party look bad. "The media has become tribal leaders," he says. "They're telling the tribe how to identify and behave, and we're following along."²⁸

Westwood is quick to note that the comparison to racism doesn't mean that partisanship is somehow worse than racism, more pervasive, or more damaging. It's easier to see—and thus discriminate—against people based on their skin color than their partisanship, for instance. Moreover, political beliefs are a choice with moral implications while race is not. Judging someone on whether they support gay marriage, universal health care, or gun laws is far different from judging someone on the color of their skin.



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Still, Iyengar and Westwood's research is a fundamental challenge to the way we like to believe American politics works. A world where we won't give an out-party high schooler with a better GPA a nonpolitical scholarship is not a world in which we're going to listen to politicians on the other side of emotional, controversial issues—even if they're making good arguments that are backed by the facts.

Iyengar and Westwood's research is confirmation of the way Tajfel thought people worked: here, again, we have people in a room, sorted by identities with no relationship to the task at hand, and using what power they have to reward the in-group and punish the out-group. "The old theory was political parties came into existence to represent deep social cleavages," Iyengar says. "But now party politics has taken on a life of its own—now it *is* the cleavage."²⁹

A life of its own. It reminds me of something else Tajfel wrote, way back in 1970. Social scientists had created a distinction between "rational" and "irrational" forms of group conflict. As Tajfel described it, "the former is a means to an end: the conflict and the attitudes that go with it reflect a genuine competition between groups with divergent interests. The latter is an end in itself: it serves to release accumulated emotional tensions of various kinds." But, Tajfel went on to say, the distinction between the two kinds of hostility was less clear than his profession thought, because "they reinforce each other in a relentless spiral."³⁰

This is, I think, the best way to understand the relationship between policy differences and identity conflict: they're mutually reinforcing, not opposed. Take immigration. Hispanics have become a more powerful and central part of the Democratic coalition. That's partly why Obama made the decision to protect law-abiding Dreamers from deportation. That decision, which angered many Republicans, is part of what opened space for

Trump to run an insurgent primary campaign heavy on anti-immigrant, pro-white rhetoric. In office, Trump has pushed a raft of anti-immigrant policies—including canceling Obama’s protections for Dreamers—which has both offended Democrats on a moral level and pushed Hispanics yet more into the Democratic column, making them more powerful in the Democratic Party.

As a result, Democrats have increasingly united behind both pro-immigrant policies and pro-immigrant values—to the extent that most of the 2020 presidential candidates endorsed decriminalizing unauthorized border crossing and giving undocumented immigrants access to public health insurance, both unthinkable policies in the Democratic Party even a few years earlier. Behind the endorsement of these ideas is the Democrats’ changing identity as a party that believes in diversity and welcomes immigrants, both documented and undocumented, as woven into the American narrative.

In 2019, I interviewed Julián Castro, the former secretary of housing and urban development, who was then running for president. “I see undocumented immigrants as being a part of the American story for generations, including this generation,” Castro told me. “I see them as integral to building a strong future for the country. I always talk about the fact that, in many ways, we need undocumented immigrants, whether we want to admit it or not.”³¹

What might have started as a limited question of immigration policy has become central to the conflict between the two parties. It’s not just about what the coalitions want to do; it’s about who they are, what they believe, who counts as their “we.”

But identity doesn’t just shape how we treat each other. It shapes how we understand the world.