

Most partisans treat politics like sports rivalries, instead of focusing on issues

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Most partisans—average Democratic and Republican voters—act like fans in sports rivalries instead of making political choices based on issues, according to a new study with a University of Kansas researcher as the lead author.

"What is the consequence of today's polarized politics? What's motivating partisans to vote in this climate?" said Patrick Miller, a University of Kansas assistant professor of [political science](#). "For too many of them, it's not high-minded, good-government, issue-based goals. It's, 'I hate the other party. I'm going to go out, and we're going to beat them.' That's troubling."

Miller and Pamela Johnston Conover, a distinguished professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, are co-authors of the study "Red and Blue States of Mind: Partisan Hostility and Voting in the United States," published recently in the journal *Political Research Quarterly*.

The researchers analyzed the attitudes of voters nationwide in survey data from the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. They found that many average voters with strong party commitments—both Democrats and Republicans—care more about their parties simply winning the election than they do either ideology or issues. Unlike previous research, the study found that loyalty to the party itself was the source of partisan rivalry and incivility, instead of a fundamental disagreement over issues.

The survey showed that 41 percent of partisans agreed that simply winning elections is more important to them than policy or ideological goals, while just 35 percent agreed that policy is a more important motivator for them to participate in politics. Only 24 percent valued both equally or expressed no opinion.

When it came to uncivil attitudes, 38 percent of partisans agreed that their parties should use any tactics necessary to "win elections and issue debates." When those who agreed with this view were asked what tactics they had in mind, the most common ones they offered were: voter suppression, stealing or cheating in elections, physical violence and threats against the other party, lying, personal attacks on opponents, not allowing the other party to speak, and using the filibuster to gridlock Congress. Democrats and Republicans were equally likely to express this opinion.

"This is the first research to show that strong partisans who are motivated by partisan conflict are endorsing uncivil attitudes about the political process," Miller said. "This comes to an important point. If our politicians are polarized and uncivil, maybe it's because many voters are polarized and uncivil."

The researchers found that these partisan dynamics are most intense when voters experience competitive elections. While most people believe closely contested elections bring healthy discussions about candidates and issues, the [survey data](#) showed the opposite, Miller said.

"Competitive elections are making you hate the other party more. They're having a 180-degree opposite effect from what we think they should," he said. "Instead of bringing us together to talk and deliberate, they're making us hateful people who are disengaged from our fellow citizens."

Miller said the study likely reflects change in the political process in the past 25 years. Other research has shown that individuals seem to insulate themselves more and more within their own party. For example, partisans increasingly consume only media content that reinforces either conservative or liberal ideas. With less knowledge of the other side's real position on issues, it helps foster hostility between the parties.

It also seems to be feeding fierce partisanship in Congress and other aspects of the American political process, he said.

"We're not thinking about politics in the way that most Founders wanted, which is to think about issues, be open to compromise, and not be attached to parties. We're looking at politics through a simplistic partisan view in which we think our side is good and their side is bad," Miller said.

The danger stems in that the political climate—with less-informed voters on issues who tend to blindly support their own party—does not foster a culture that punishes ineffective incumbents on both sides who might have supported failed policies while in office or be tied to scandals.

"If all I care about is the game and my side winning, then what happens between games? I am not paying much attention to policy after the election. I'm only tuning back in at game time to find out who my team is fielding in the election. Too many partisans are saying, 'my side is good; the other side is evil. We have to go beat them,'" Miller said.

"They're our rivals, like Kansas or Missouri, Duke or North Carolina. And that sense of animosity and demonization is really motivating average partisans to participate in politics, much more so than issues or ideology."

This likely fans the flames of partisanship in Congress, he said.

"If politicians in Congress are uncivil, not compromising and misbehaving, they're partly giving us what we want, especially primary voters, those most committed partisans," Miller said. "We as citizens bear huge responsibility for what's happening. We enable dysfunction in Washington, whether we realize it or not."

Miller and Conover, who study political partisanship, published an earlier study that found women were more likely than men to seek out compromise in partisan political fights.

"If you want politics to change, you need brave politicians of both parties to convince the average partisan that just because you may disagree with those other people, that doesn't mean the other side is evil and that you're not necessarily morally superior," Miller said. "You're no more or less American than they are. And maybe, you don't have to hate each other to disagree. But that's a very unpalatable argument to a lot of average people."

More information: *Political Research Quarterly*,
prq.sagepub.com/content/early/.../25/1065912915577208

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