

# What can polling tell us about impeachment? An identity politics expert has the answer.

October 29 2019

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An illustrated image of Donald Trump, the President of the United States.  
Credit: Photo/The White House | Illustration/Deborah Wider

Donald Trump became just the fourth President in American history to face the prospect of removal from office when Speaker of the House

Nancy Pelosi initiated the impeachment inquiry that has roiled Washington for the past several weeks.

The inquiry came after a whistleblower alleged the President and others in his administration had pressured foreign leaders to advance Trump's personal interest.

[Polls show](#) impeachment has divided Americans, and almost exclusively on [party lines](#).

Brandeis politics professor Amber Spry, an expert on [identity politics](#), survey design methods and polling, discussed the prospects of impeachment with BrandeisNOW:

Polls show there's been an increase in support for impeachment, even among Republicans. How do you account for that change?

Polling data suggests that while impeachment is a divisive issue, we do see evidence that opinions are changing. More people support impeachment and President Trump's removal from office than they did in past months.

It's hard to tell what the changes in numbers are responding to – it could be the information released by the whistleblower, it could be that once the inquiry was introduced, impeachment became a topic in public discourse and so voters have generated thoughts they didn't have before, and it could also be that people have more of a grasp on what impeachment means because there's more information on the topic itself.

It's probably a combination of those three factors.

**Can individuals put partisanship to the side as they**

## **think about impeachment?**

Often, when researchers try to understand the forces that can lead a person to change their mind on an issue, what we actually find is that beliefs are hard to change. But beliefs can, and do, shift in some circumstances.

Discourse, and sharing information, is key. So even though we are living in an age of increased skepticism over facts and fear of misinformation, I think personal connections will play a more important role than ever.

Overall, research suggests our prior beliefs influence our interpretations of facts. Rather than looking at facts as objective, human tendency is to filter facts through the lens of our prior beliefs. That's how we determine whether or not a fact has any merit.

So, while there's a large subset of people in the U.S. who look at the issues that have brought about President Trump's impeachment inquiry and say, "this is indisputable, this goes against the behavior we expect of a president as outlined in the Constitution," there's still a large segment of the population that examines the events that have led to the impeachment proceedings and says "I can't trust what any of that says...I can't trust that the Democrats are telling the truth or that they'd be objective in an impeachment trial...I can't trust that the allegations are as bad as anyone says they are."

All of that has to do with worldview. Those are deeply held, and very hard to overcome, and I'm not sure there's a solution to that.

## **What aspects of people's identity do they bring to the table when they consider impeachment?**

Partisan group ties are an obvious consideration. We might think that Republicans will want the outcome they think is best for the Republican Party, and Democrats will want what's best for the Democratic Party, but people have lots of considerations besides partisanship.

In fact, my research shows that when given the opportunity to talk candidly about their [political preferences](#), most people don't talk about their political selves in partisan terms. They talk about what's best for themselves economically, or what's best for people in their communities, or for their racial group, or for people who share their faith. In [political science](#) we call that identity-to-politics connection "group consciousness."

So the identities people bring to the table when they consider impeachment are going to be the identities that are most important to their political selves—and those identities vary from person to person.

## **Do you have any insight into how those identities vary?**

In sets of interviews, I'll ask people to tell me how they identify themselves, and later ask what issues they think are most important in politics. And I don't prompt anyone to talk about their political views through the lens of identity, but that's what tends to happen for many people.

Folks who emphasized their racial identity tended to talk about political issues that make race salient—like policing and welfare spending for Black Americans, or immigration reform among Hispanic Americans. People who emphasized that they were working class tended to talk about employment and job creation. And I demonstrate this point empirically by showing that when people have an opportunity to tell us

what identities matter the most to them, rather than just checking off boxes, policy attitudes related to those important identities are particularly strong at the individual level.

So if we believe [identity](#) has some bearing on impeachment attitudes, it'll be because impeachment has some consequence for the groups that people think are important in their own lived experiences. And that connection will be stronger for some people than others.

## **Do you agree with the narrative that America is divided, and that impeachment is just the latest example?**

To some extent, this narrative of a divided country doesn't consider the many areas where Americans want the same provisions of goods and services, which is especially true of politics at the local level.

When I ask people what matters most to them in politics, they talk about issues in non-partisan, candid terms. They're not thinking about what's good for their party, they're thinking about policies that impact their day-to-day lives. If we use different measures, not parties, to study political opinions, some of our inferences about divisiveness could change.

That's not to say the claim of divisiveness is exaggerated where it does apply, though.

In the areas we do see division in the American public, it's entrenched. In part, it's due to the party labels we use. When we make everything a Democratic or Republican issue, we ignore the many ways people really have more nuanced beliefs when we take the labels away.

Provided by Brandeis University

Citation: What can polling tell us about impeachment? An identity politics expert has the answer. (2019, October 29) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-10-polling-impeachment-identity-politics-expert.html>

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