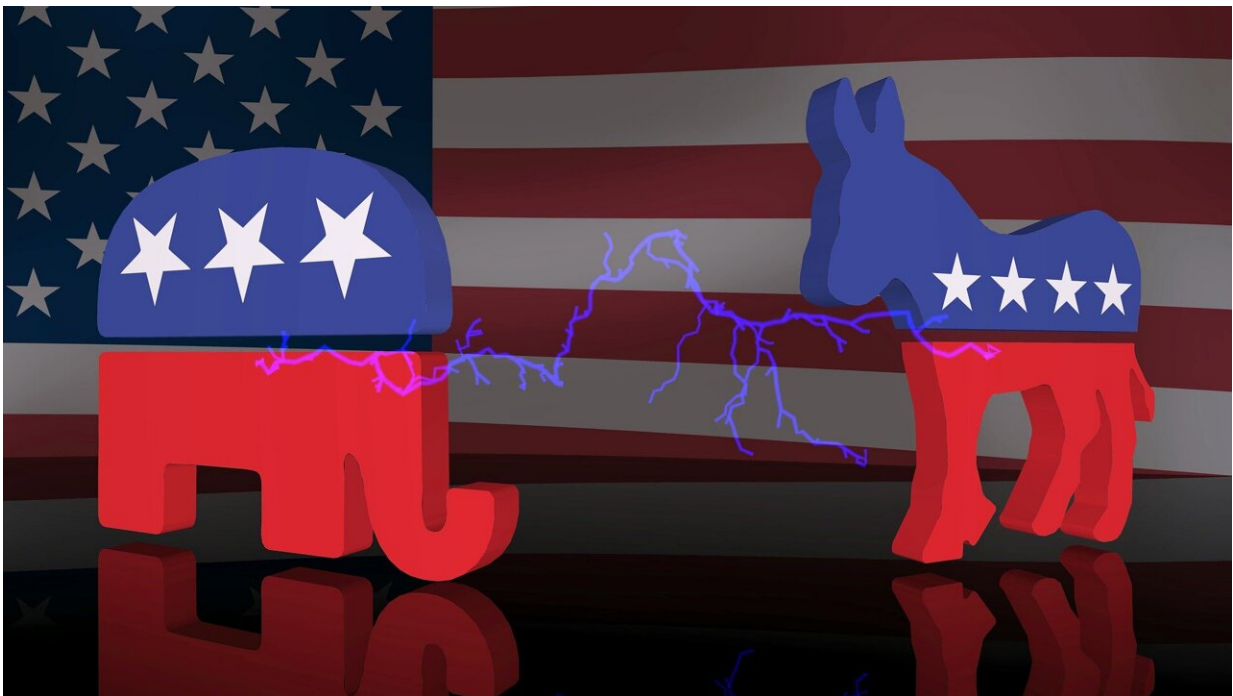


'Affective polarization' increasingly leaks into social situations, says new study

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Partisanship is a particularly potent source of group identity in contemporary American politics, and a new paper co-written by a University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign expert in political psychology says the growing chasm between opposing groups isn't limited to interactions in the political realm.

Mounting evidence suggests that "affective [polarization](#)" leaks into and colors social situations—barbecues, book clubs, sporting events and the like—that previously existed beyond the reach of partisan politics, said Thomas J. Rudolph, the Lincoln Distinguished Professorial Scholar of Political Science at Illinois.

"Consistent with other recent research, this study confirms that affective polarization along partisan lines is real and that it exists in both political and nonpolitical settings," Rudolph said.

Affective polarization is "the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively," according to the paper.

"Affective polarization means you're more likely to view the other party as ideologically extreme, and that elections have high stakes and their outcomes are consequential," Rudolph said. "Although it's not confined to the U.S., it's a phenomenon that has increased and become more prevalent domestically over time."

Using a survey experiment of more than 280 undergraduate students in fall 2018 to analyze partisans' affective evaluations, Rudolph and co-author Marc J. Hetherington, of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, found that the dominant mechanism of affective polarization varies depending on the context.

"We show that while affective polarization exists across both political and nonpolitical settings, its magnitude is nearly twice as large in political settings," Rudolph said. "Although affective polarization reflects a blend of both in-party love and out-party hate, we find that in-party love is the dominant source in nonpolitical settings and out-party hate dominates in political settings. Since the U.S. is essentially a two-party system, everyone's focus is always concentrated on the same

political rivalry."

The findings are both comforting and disquieting, Rudolph said.

"On the one hand, it's reassuring that partisan polarization in [social settings](#) is not as pronounced as it is in political settings," he said. "On the other hand, the fact that such polarization exists at all in social settings is somewhat troubling."

Although the public is accustomed to seeing partisan animosity on display during election season or at political events such as rallies or protests, "we've seen comparatively little of such animosity expressed in normal social settings," Rudolph said.

"Regrettably, that may be changing somewhat as polarization has increasingly leaked into nonpolitical domains," he said. "Consider the sports world. Sports used to be a place where Republicans and Democrats could check their politics at the turnstile and focus on watching a ballgame and cheering for their favorite player or team. Today, athletes have become frequent targets of partisan criticism—or praise—for their positions on personal decisions such as whether to stand for the national anthem or whether to get vaccinated.

"In recent weeks, the sports world has become even more politically charged, as evidenced by the anti-Joe Biden chants that have been sweeping sports stadiums across the country and gone viral on the internet."

According to Rudolph, we should be concerned that polarization continues to seep into the nonpolitical domain.

"Our study definitely shows that there's partisan polarization in the social world and that it's a real, measurable phenomenon," he said. "Social

settings like sporting events, book clubs, schools and the workplace provide regular opportunities for people to come into contact with others who may think differently than they do. Such interactions are healthy because they expose people to diverse viewpoints about the world, including the political world. But if partisan polarization permeates every corner of the social world, people may retreat to their [partisan](#) corners and be less willing to engage with members of the opposing team, and as a result, be less able to understand or appreciate them.

"And that may bleed into the political realm, thereby making it harder to reach compromise on some issues where there might otherwise be common ground. The net effect is that we see less and less of that among our leaders at the local, state and federal level, which is quite unfortunate."

The paper was published in the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*.

More information: Thomas J Rudolph et al, Affective Polarization in Political and Nonpolitical Settings, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/ijpor/edaa040](https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edaa040)

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