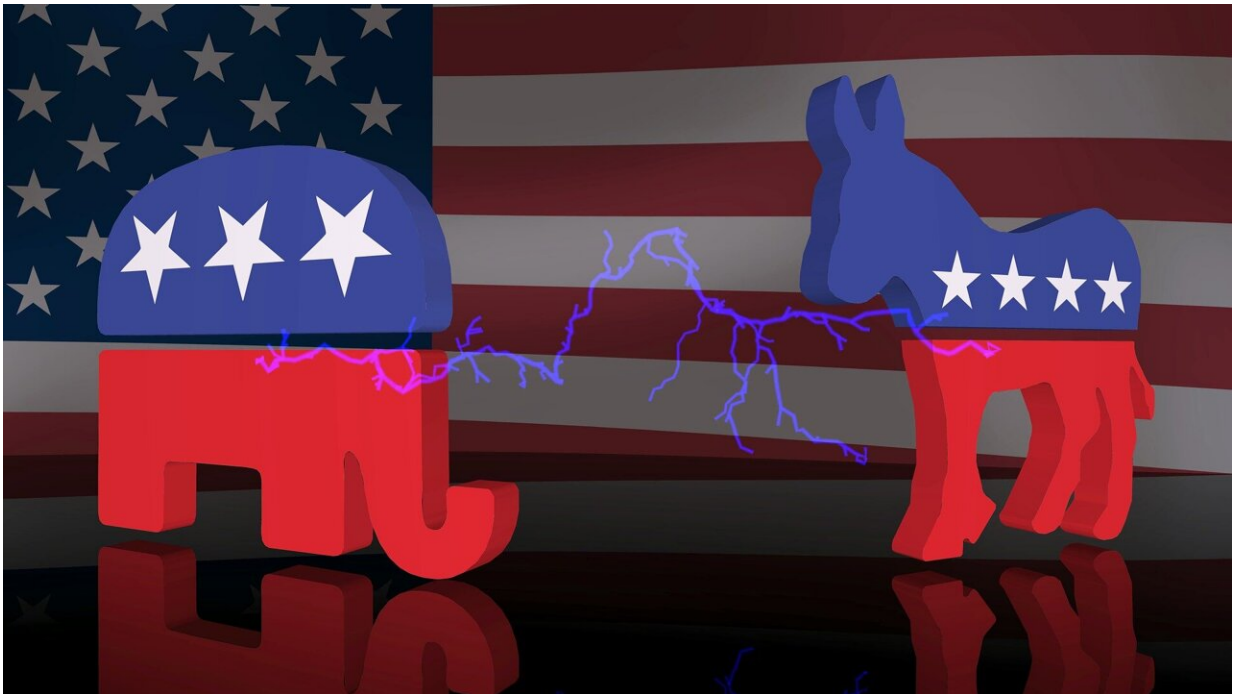


# Are Republicans and Democrats driven by hatred of one another? Less than you think

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When it comes to attitudes and behaviors among members of American political parties, the conventional wisdom is that hate is stronger than love.

Americans' perception of negative partisanship—that Democrats or Republicans are primarily driven by their hatred for their [political](#)

[opponents](#)—has ballooned in recent years, particularly in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. It has become a popular assumption that members of America's [political parties](#) are united more by their hatred of the other side of the aisle than by their affinity to their own.

A new study from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania suggests this is not the case. The research team, led by Amber Hye-Yon Lee (Ph.D. '20) and Associate Professor Yphtach Lelkes, investigated what motivates Americans to affiliate with the Democratic and Republican parties. Published in *Nature Human Behaviour*, the paper finds that the perception of American partisanship as overwhelmingly negative is exaggerated.

The researchers set out to answer two questions: First, to what extent is partisan hatred widespread? And second, is that hatred really more intense than their affinity to their own party members?

Using several different data sets – including a survey directly asking people how their hatred of another party impacts their affiliation decisions – the study found that people's primary motivations for choosing a party are more strongly tied to love for their own party, rather than hatred of the other side. The study also measured the degree to which allegiances are motivated by hatred of the other party using an experiment designed to disentangle hurting the other side monetarily from helping one's own side monetarily.

Lelkes stresses that the implications of negative partisanship are problematic on many practical levels.

"If there's this gap in how much you like your side and dislike the other side, and it's all motivated by emotions, you're less likely to hold presidents accountable for things and more likely to vote for your side no matter what they do, even when it's corrupt," Lelkes says. "If it's just

driven by hatred, then it's not about interest groups and coming together and fighting for your group. It's much more toxic."

Lee hopes that the study can help everyday Americans better understand what motivates voters.

"Many people are led to believe that the other side is driven by hatred and is out to get them," she says. "Hatred only breeds hatred, so by showing that there is really no clear evidence for hatred of the other party trumping everything, I am hoping we can clear up some of the misperceptions people have about how much they are hated by their political opponents, and by extension, discourage people from feeding their own hostility in response to exaggerated perceptions of hostility coming from the other side."

Lelkes, who studies politician polarization and communication, agrees that the study's findings merit more media attention. He notes that scholars tend to love the term "negative partisanship" and that news outlets may have a bias toward disproportionately covering expressions of extreme emotions, like hatred, that tend to garner more clicks.

The impact can be self-fulfilling: "When we talk about politics being overwhelmingly negative, it leads to that," Lelkes says. "We are wildly off in how we think the other side feels about us. We're trying to tone that down."

**More information:** Amber Hye-Yon Lee et al, Negative partisanship is not more prevalent than positive partisanship, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-022-01348-0](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01348-0)

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