

Political independents found to be more negative than partisans: Study

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In this era of extreme partisanship, the people who express the most negativity in their political choices are those we may least expect: independents.

In a new paper, researchers conducted five studies in which they found that independents were more likely than partisans to frame their position in terms of opposition to one party, candidate, message or option rather than in support of the other choice.

And it's not just in politics: One study found that "independents" who didn't have a strong preference of baseball teams, or even academic subjects and ice cream flavors were more likely to choose based on what they didn't like than on what they liked.

"It's common to blame negative partisanship for our political polarization and dysfunction that we have in politics today. You see that explanation in media articles frequently," said Joseph Siev, who led the study as a doctoral student in psychology at The Ohio State University.

"We consistently found that partisans were less likely than independents to have preferences based on negativity."

In some ways, it is not surprising that independents were more negative than partisans, said Siev, who is now a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business.

"The thing about independents is that they don't like either party or candidate enough to say they are a supporter," he said. "They start out with a negative view of the options."

The study was published online recently in the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#).

The research team found evidence of independents' embrace of the negative in a variety of contexts.

In one study, the researchers used data from the 1968-2020 American National Election Studies, involving 38,759 respondents from across the nation. Participants reported their views of the political parties and the presidential candidates.

Participants rated candidates and political parties on a feeling thermometer from 100 (very favorable) to 0 (very unfavorable).

The researchers subtracted the degree of negativity toward the non-preferred side (sometimes called "outgroup hate") from positivity toward the preferred side ("ingroup love"), creating a positive-versus-negative partisanship score.

The results showed that independents—including Democrat-leaning and Republican-leaning independents—had more negative scores of the political parties than partisans in all 14 years of the survey. Independents were also more negative than partisans on the candidate-based measure in 12 of the 14 years.

The results were even more explicit when the researchers examined political surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center that specifically asked voters if their choice of a presidential candidate was more for one candidate or against the other candidate.

Pew asked that question before the 2000, 2008, 2016 and 2020 [presidential elections](#).

Across all the elections, independents were more likely to vote against a candidate than partisans were.

Both before 2008 and after 2016, negative voting was consistently 10 to 17 percentage points higher among independents than partisans. And since 2016, the majority of independents said they voted against a candidate rather than for the other option.

"Independents were voting negatively even before it became more generally popular before the 2016 election," said study co-author Richard Petty, professor of psychology at Ohio State.

"We think this stems from independents defining themselves in terms of what they are not, rather than what they are."

In another study, conducted online, partisans and independents who leaned Democrat or leaned Republican were asked whether they agreed with messages that argued why it was good to support their party (or the party they leaned toward) or why it was good to oppose the other party.

Results showed that Republican-leaning and Democrat-leaning independents agreed more with appeals to oppose their non-preferred party, while partisans agreed more with messages that supported their party.

Results from these studies don't mean that partisans don't dislike their opponents on the other side—they do, and maybe more than independents do, Petty said.

"But political partisans base their electoral choices more on who or what they like, whereas independents base their preferences to a greater degree on who or what they don't like," he said.

The lean toward negativity among independents extends beyond politics. In a study conducted online, the researchers looked at several non-political preferences—between professional baseball teams (Yankees versus Red Sox), ice cream flavors (chocolate versus vanilla) and academic subjects (math versus writing). The researchers compared those who had a clear preference of one over the other to participants who said they simply "leaned" one way or the other.

As in the American National Election Studies, participants completed a feeling thermometer rating how favorable they felt about both choices on a scale of 0 to 100. They were also asked if their choice was more for one alternative or against the other.

And again, the independent leaners based their choices more on negativity against their non-preferred [choice](#) compared to the partisans.

"This helps put our results from politics in a broader perspective," Siev said.

"It suggests that independents may be psychologically distinct from other people in meaningful ways. They may have different ways of approaching the world, and framing their preferences in positive or negative ways. It is worth researching more."

More information: Joseph J. Siev et al, Independents, not partisans, are more likely to hold and express electoral preferences based in negativity, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104538](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104538)

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