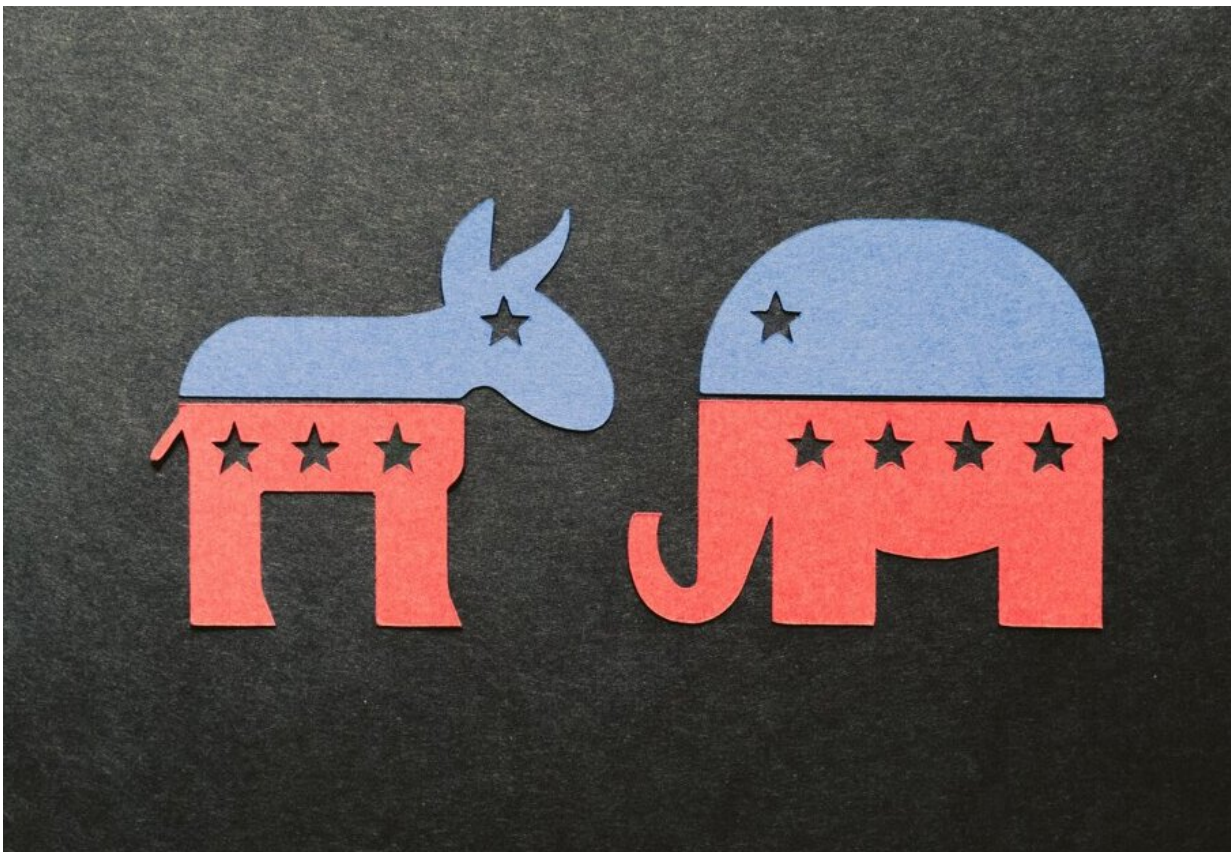


## Research suggests darker side of being politically confident

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Could being well informed about politics mean you are less tolerant of differing political opinions? The answer might surprise you and be cause for pause before your next political conversation.

New research from Michigan State University suggests that those who feel self-confident about their political abilities are more likely to discriminate against those who hold opposing [political views](#). And those who are more skeptical of their political abilities are more likely to treat other people fairly when they disagree politically.

Jennifer Wolak is a professor in the Department of Political Science in the College of Social Science and her research focuses on [public opinion](#) and how people think about politics. Wolak and Carey Stapleton of University of Massachusetts Amherst published [the study](#) in the journal *Public Opinion Quarterly*, complicating how we view the value of self-confidence in politics.

"We usually think that it is a good thing to feel confident about your abilities. People who believe they can make a difference in politics tend to be good citizens—they keep up with current events and participate in elections," Wolak said. "In this research, we highlight the dark side of political self-confidence. When people feel self-assured about their political abilities, they are closed-minded, hostile and ready to discriminate against those who do not share their political views."

## **Political polarization on the rise**

Political polarization and growing animosity toward opposing views is only becoming more of an issue. It prevents political progress and divides more Americans.

In the 2022 mid-term election, three out of 10 Americans said political polarization was the top issue facing the nation. About two-thirds of both Democrats and Republicans believe members of the other party are dishonest and only 20% of marriages are politically mixed.

As there are many explanations for polarization, an explanation less

explored is political confidence and strong self-assurance.

## **Study set up and results**

The research involved two parts; the first relied on [survey data](#) to evaluate political efficacy and views of the political parties; the second was a survey experiment to evaluate tolerance of political discrimination.

In the first part of the study, 1,000 Americans were sampled in a national online survey just before the 2020 presidential election and asked about their opinions about the opposing political party.

Those in the study who felt knowledgeable about politics and confident about their political abilities are referred to as having high internal political efficacy, whereas those who are more unsure have lower internal political efficacy.

Wolak and Stapleton found that those with the greatest confidence in their political abilities were the most likely to express hostility toward those with opposing views. People with high internal efficacy were willing to sever social ties over political differences and refuse conversations with anyone who disagreed with them politically. Additionally, people with high political self-confidence were more likely to tolerate partisan discrimination, saying they believed that it is OK to treat people differently because of their political views.

In the survey experiment, respondents were given a description of a hiring manager who refused to interview a job applicant based on the applicant's previous leadership of either a College Democrats or College Republicans group.

The results found most people felt that it was not acceptable to discriminate against the job candidate for their political views, but those

with the greatest internal political efficacy were the most likely to say that it was okay to not hire someone affiliated with the opposing political party.

## **Implications of the study**

Self-confidence is important and it is often seen as something very positive and admirable. However, these results suggest that in the context of politics, while it is important to be involved and think of yourself as an expert, it can motivate animosity.

Individuals who are politically confident and a frequent voter are more likely to contribute to adversarial politics and partisan negativity—suggesting that confidence can be a source of political polarization.

Second, people are less uncomfortable with discrimination when it is directed at the differing political party. Therefore, this study suggests that those with political confidence need to be more mindful of how they are evaluating information and their own confirmation biases when considering opposing views.

"Some people are deeply engaged in politics—they watch the news every day, follow political content on social media and talk about [current events](#) with friends and family. Other people rarely think about politics at all," Wolak said. "While these folks are less politically assertive, they are much more willing to spend time with people who disagree with them. They are also much less likely to engage in partisan discrimination."

While these findings underscore the potential negative implications of having strong political convictions, they do not propose individuals change their opinions. Rather, the findings provide insight on how

people can mitigate political polarization by thoughtfully considering how they view those who may think differently on an issue or how they might approach their next conversation about the 2024 election.

**More information:** Carey E Stapleton et al, Political Self-Confidence and Affective Polarization, *Public Opinion Quarterly* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/poq/nfad064](https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfad064)

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