
The Power of Modern Partisanship

The Aligning of Social and Political Identity and Its Effects
An **Our Age of Uncertainty** paper by Chris Jackson



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**Our Age of
Uncertainty**

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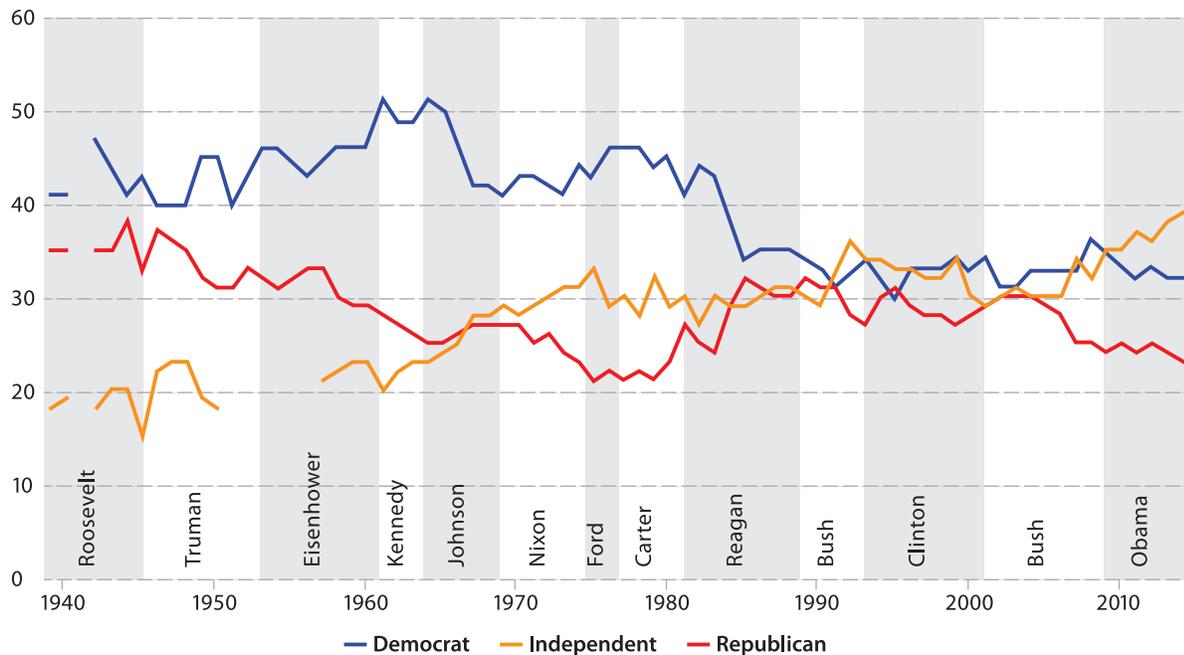
The Aligning of Social and Political Identity and Its Effects

Politicians, pollsters, and social scientists all seek to understand and predict how people will respond to events. To this end, we have found that identity—or, more precisely, how people define themselves—is a powerful predictor of behavior. This is an outgrowth of using demographics in social sciences as proxies for a wider range of socio-cultural beliefs. Since people have many different ways of characterizing themselves in different circumstances, contexts, or times, researchers have traditionally relied on context-specific identifiers. For instance, someone may behave like a parent at home but an employee at work. However, one particular type of identity—political partisanship—has become the lens for many Americans in how they relate to the world around them. This has problematic implications, not just for government, but for civil society and the economy, as party identification has an increasingly zero-sum logic of “with us or against us.”

Political partisanship is not a new phenomenon. It has existed since the establishment of the American Republic when Thomas Jefferson’s Democratic-Republican Party faced off against Alexander Hamilton’s Federalist Party. Over the subsequent two-plus centuries, our political parties have evolved, and public allegiance to them has waxed and waned with the epoch. However, many claim our contemporary partisanship to be more corrosive and more detrimental to the functioning of society than at any time in recent history. How has this come to be the case? What is different about our modern partisanship?

When people hear of “increased partisanship,” as they often do today, they may think that an ever-larger proportion of Americans are closely identifying with either of the two major political parties. However, a quick look at trend data indicates that this has not been the pattern over the last few decades. In fact, as indicated in the graph below, proportionally fewer Americans are identifying as Republicans or Democrats, and more describe themselves as Independents. So, the standard conception of partisanship does not apply to what we see today.

Percentage of Americans who say they are...



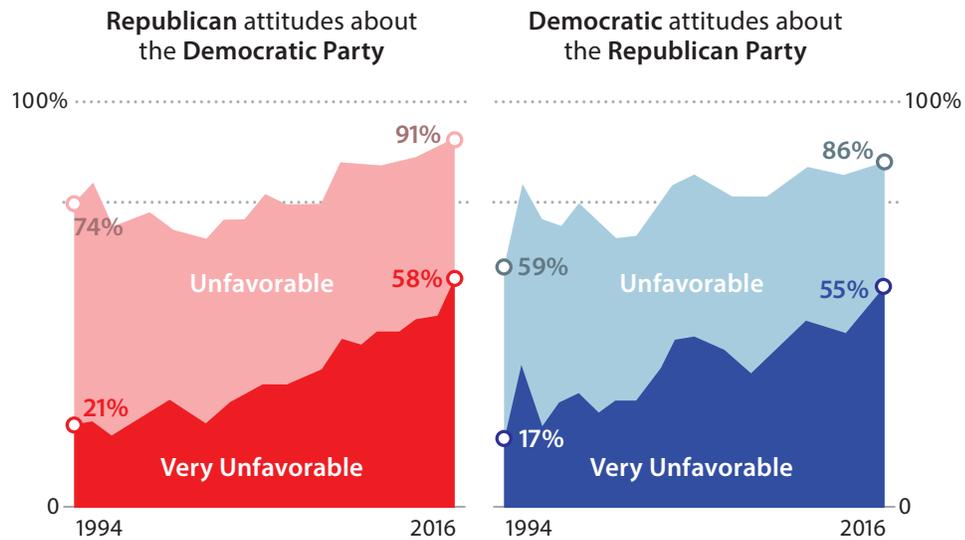
Note: 1939–1989 yearly averages from the Gallup Organization interactive website. 1990–2014 yearly total from Pew Research Center aggregate files. Based on the general public. Data unavailable for 1941. Independent data unavailable for 1951–1956.

In reality, modern partisanship is about three slightly more subtle trends.

The first trend is the increasing social isolation of partisans from people on the other side. In 2016, half of all voters lived in counties where Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton won two-thirds of the vote or more. This means that most voters live in places that overwhelmingly support one party over the other. This is a fairly recent development. For reference, in 2000—the last time one presidential candidate won the popular vote and another won the electoral college—only 25% of all voters lived in counties that were as lopsided. The dramatic change we have seen in less than a generation is part of the larger sorting of America into relatively affluent urban enclaves, which tend to be Democratic, and everything else, which skews Republican. Social isolation has resulted in a situation where supporters of different parties rarely interact with each other which has curtailed the moderating influence of having to socialize with people with different viewpoints.

The second facet of modern partisanship is the increasing strength of negative partisanship. Negative partisanship is simply having hostile views of people from the opposing group. This hostility is independent of your affinity toward your in-group. In fact, current partisanship is characterized by somewhat weak affinity toward the in-group combined with pronounced hostility toward the other side. While Democrats and Republicans may have never held particularly warm feelings about each other's party, they are now likely not just to disapprove of, but to feel animosity toward the other side. The following charts show how in the course of just two decades, the share of both Republican and Democrat supporters who hold very unfavorable views of the other party has grown from roughly one in four to about three in five. These hostile sentiments make it harder to find any sort of common ground and make it easier to believe the very worst about your political opponent.

Majorities have deeply negative views of other party



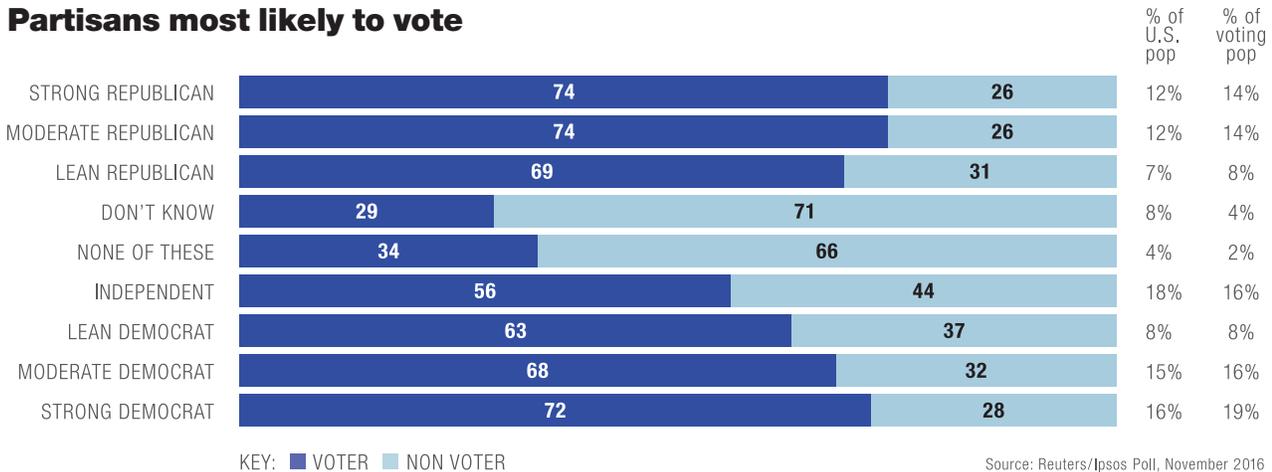
Source: Survey conducted April 12–19, 2016 • Pew Research Center

Third, most people who now identify as “moderate” or “independent” are opting out of regular political participation. Although more Americans consider themselves Independents now than at any other point in the last few decades, their “independence” is less a reflection of a moderate or conciliatory position between Republicans and Democrats than of a revulsion by both parties and their leaders. As a consequence, these independent Americans are withdrawing from political life and leaving the field to the fewer, but more intense partisans on either side.

SIDEBAR

At their worst, feelings of negative partisanship morph into active dehumanization of people on the other side. Researchers and specialists in civil and ethnic strife point to this dehumanization as one of the key early indicators of civil violence. It is worrisome that partisanship in the United States is moving in that direction.

Partisans most likely to vote



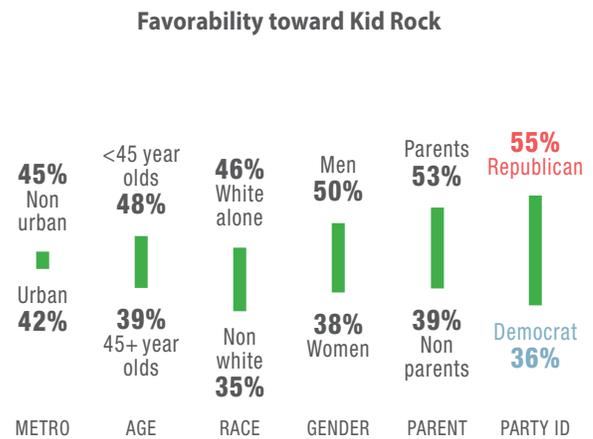
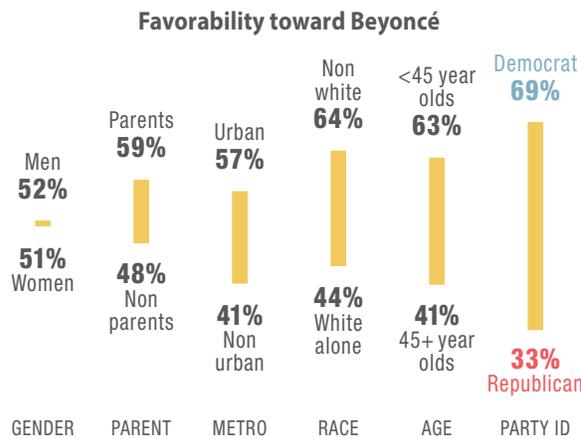
In the postwar era, partisanship was moderated by the tendency for people to define themselves in a variety of ways that did not line up perfectly with politics. To a large extent, northeastern Republicans traveled in the same social circles and had the same life experiences as northeastern Democrats. Likewise, southern Democrats came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds as southern Republicans. Race, gender, or education level often said more about who you were and what you did than your partisan identification.

Over the last two decades, cross-cutting identifications along demographic, social, and religious lines have increasingly realigned and meshed into a strong identification with one party, fueled by strong antipathy toward the other party. Now, we have a party of older, white men against a party of younger minority women. While this is a gross simplification of the demographic composition of each party, the reality remains that partisan identification

is now a stronger predictor of how almost any American will respond to almost any situation than any other demographic or social criteria. This means we no longer have other commonalities pulling us together when party pushes us apart.

Some recent data illustrates how much party divides us. This graph shows the average favorability toward a prominent entertainer and a prominent athlete by several demographic categories and party ID. In the case of Beyoncé, her favorability varies more along partisan lines than it does by any demographic variable, including gender, age, habitat, presence of children in the household, and race. Similarly, Kid Rock's favorability also varies more by party ID than it does by any other characteristic. This shows how party ID is increasingly grouping outlook beyond what would be described by traditional demographic predictors alone.

Favorability toward public figures



These partisan trends have ominous implications for American society. The new partisanship makes extremist candidates increasingly acceptable because “at least they are better than the other side.” It also has the potential of causing a breakdown in the functioning of government, because intense partisans will not support compromise with the other side. A sense of “how dare you work with those villains” will preclude much of the deal-making that is the core of the normal process of governing. Additionally, it affects how Americans view the world and make choices, not only as citizens, but also as consumers with brands increasingly seen as “R” or “D.”

How Americans respond to the increasing partisanship depends on what they hope to achieve. For “true believers” and cynics, this bloom in strong partisan identification is a boon. Among people who really believe in a cause or just want to sound like they do, using partisan sentiments to push for agendas can be much easier than trying to advocate based on merit. It is often relatively easy to convince people to support any position if you can make them hate the other side strongly enough.

However, among Americans who are more interested in the healthy functioning of society or government, modern partisanship is a serious problem. Surmounting it requires either completely avoiding the subject of politics—something challenging when the Commander-in-Chief regularly calls people and organizations out via social media—or attracting people to a larger sense of identity than that provided by party. In either case, simply stating facts and hoping for the best is unlikely to yield a positive outcome, as facts themselves have become a partisan battleground.

The reality is that despite these partisan and polarized times, most communities and organizations are still made up of both Democrats and Republicans. Just ignoring partisan or tribal loyalties of people is an increasingly untenable and unwise policy for decision makers. Leaders in this climate must understand where their people currently are and what political team they identify with. Then the real challenge becomes trying to attract people to a broader sense of identity that unifies more than it divides. The next generation of leaders will, by necessity, need to become fluent at defining the in-group identity as large enough to encompass both sides. This is the central leadership challenge of this age of modern partisanship.

SIDEBAR

The 2017 Virginia gubernatorial race is a case study in the use of partisan identification. Republican candidate Ed Gillespie has for most of his career been a business-friendly centrist Republican who never spent much time on values or identity issues. However, his campaign pivoted to portray his opponent as hostile towards Confederate monuments and soft on crime. While his effort came up short of the governor's mansion, this appeal to identity and symbols is the core of contemporary "Trumpism."

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