

Opinions

## America's new cycle of partisan hatred



By **Dana Milbank** Opinion writer April 17

After a political rally this week in which Democrats criticized the Obama administration for siding with Republicans on trade, I had a talk about the future of the party with Rep. Alan Grayson, a Florida Democrat who is one of the most ferocious partisans in the House.

It does no good, he told me, for Democrats to “pretend to be Republican” or to “run corporate campaigns and try to pretend that they’re going to govern from the middle.” His rationale: There is no middle.

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“Essentially there are no undecided voters. Everybody has picked a team. The only question is, do your guys vote or not?” Grayson explained. What matters, he said, is “what side are you on?”

That justifies Grayson’s incendiary politics; he’s the guy who famously said that the Republican health-care plan is “die quickly” and called Republicans “knuckle-dragging Neanderthals,” “unscrupulous” and “The Selfish Party.” He operates essentially under the same no-compromise logic that propels Ted Cruz and other Republican fanatics. And as much as I oppose their style of politics, I fear that their assessment of the electorate is correct.

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Up until the mid-1980s, the typical American held the view that partisans on the other side operated with good intentions. But that has changed in dramatic fashion, as [a study published last year](#) by Stanford and Princeton researchers demonstrates.

It has long been agreed that race is the deepest divide in American society. But that is no longer true, say Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood, the academics who led the study. Using a variety of social science methods (for example, having study participants review résumés of people that make both their race and party affiliation clear), they document that “the level of partisan animus in the American public exceeds racial hostility.”

Americans now discriminate more on the basis of party than on race, gender or any of the other divides we typically think of — and that discrimination extends beyond politics into personal relationships and non-political behaviors. Americans increasingly live in neighborhoods with like-minded partisans, marry fellow partisans and disapprove of their children marrying mates from the other party, and they are more likely to choose partners based on partisanship than physical or personality attributes.

“Unlike race, gender and other social divides where group-related attitudes and behaviors are constrained by social norms, there are no corresponding pressures to temper disapproval of political opponents,” they conclude. “If anything, the rhetoric and actions of political leaders demonstrate that hostility directed at the opposition is acceptable, even appropriate. Partisans therefore feel free to express animus and engage in discriminatory behavior toward opposing partisans.”

Up to and through the early 1980s, the average American had a neutral view of opposing partisans. But since then, “partisans have come to dislike the opposition and like co-partisans dramatically more,” Westwood told me. Favorable feelings toward partisans on the other side

have dropped by 10 percentage points — going from tepid on what social scientists call a “feeling thermometer” to being “clearly in the cold.”

This hyper-partisanship has occurred even though fewer people identify with the actual parties. The vast majority of self-described independents actually lean toward one party or the other, and they are often even more partisan in their views than those who identify themselves with a party.

Also of note is that the partisan polarization occurs even though Americans aren't all that split on policies or ideology. Their partisanship is more tribal than anything — the result of an ill-informed electorate. “In order to have an understanding of the ideology of your party and the opposing party you have to have a lot of information,” and “that's something that just doesn't happen for the majority of the electorate,” said Westwood. “However, most people understand their side is good and the opposing side is bad, so it's much easier for them to form these emotional opinions of political parties.”

This leads to a grim conclusion: The problem with politics isn't Washington but the electorate. Members of Congress, most of whom come from safely gerrymandered districts, are behaving in a perfectly rational way when they avoid cooperation with the other party and instead try to build support within their own tribe.

Elected officials and professional partisans then reinforce the tribal tendency in the electorate with overheated rhetoric, perpetual campaigns, negative ads and increasingly partisan media outlets. “The individuals who hold more hostility are then given the green light to hold these more hostile positions,” Westwood explained.

So does he see a way out of this tribal cycle of hatred? “Sadly, no.”

Fixing Washington becomes more complicated if the problems here are also deep in the American electorate.

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