

Running Head: POLITICAL SECTARIANISM

**Political Sectarianism:
A Dangerous Cocktail of Othering, Aversion, and Moralization**

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Political Sectarianism: A Dangerous Cocktail of Othering, Aversion, and Moralization

A dominant feature of American politics today is acrimony. For decades, researchers have studied political polarization as an ideological matter—how strongly Democrats and Republicans diverge vis-à-vis political ideals and policy goals. More recently, however, researchers have identified a second type of polarization, one focusing less on triumphs in the marketplace of political ideas than on dominating the contemptible supporters of the opposing party.¹ This literature has produced a remarkable proliferation of insights and constructs, but few interdisciplinary efforts to integrate them. We offer such an integration, pinpointing the superordinate construct of *political sectarianism* and identifying its tripartite structure. We then consider its causes and its harmful consequences for American society—especially the threat it poses to democracy. Finally, we propose interventions for minimizing its most corrosive characteristics.

Alarm Bells

Democrats and Republicans have grown more contemptuous of opposing partisans for decades, but only recently has this aversion exceeded their affection for copartisans. On a “feeling thermometer” scale ranging from *cold* (0°) to *warm* (100°), feelings toward copartisans have consistently hovered in the 70-75° range. In contrast, feelings toward opposing partisans have plummeted from a mild 48° in the 1970s to a frosty 20° today (Figure 1a). Examining how far the assessments of copartisan and opposing partisans deviate from the scale’s neutral point of 50° reveals that, since 2012—and for the first time on record—out-party hate has been stronger than in-party love (Figure 1b). It has also become a more powerful predictor of voting behavior.²

[*Insert Box 1 Around Here.*]

This aversion to opposing partisans—which, by some metrics, is now stronger than long-standing antipathies surrounding race and religion—might be reasonable if out-party hate were

closely linked to political ideals. After all, some level of ideological differentiation is an essential feature of party-based democracy, sharpening debates such as those surrounding government regulation of industry. Because most people lack the expertise required to make informed judgments on specific policies, distinctive and internally coherent party platforms serve as helpful heuristics that voters can use to prioritize their preferred policies and hold politicians accountable. But surging out-party hate in America today is not driven primarily by political ideas. Indeed, although there is little doubt that Americans have grown increasingly disdainful toward opposing partisans in recent decades, the evidence that they have polarized in terms of policy preferences is equivocal. Along the way, the causal connection between policy preferences and party loyalty has become warped, with partisans adjusting their policy preferences to align with their party identity—as when Republicans exhibit a liberal attitude shift after exposure to a clip of President Donald Trump voicing a liberal policy position. Consequently, the severity of political conflict has grown increasingly independent of the magnitude of political disagreement.³

Box 1: On American Exceptionalism

Research on political polarization focuses disproportionately on America, but what does feeling-thermometer research say about political sectarianism in other Western democracies? The most relevant study leverages data from 1975 through 2017 to examine feelings towards copartisans and opposing partisans in nine Western democracies, controlling for size and number of parties. It provides a valuable, albeit noncomprehensive, comparison set.⁴

Four nations—America, Canada, New Zealand, and Switzerland—exhibit increasing sectarianism over time, with the rate steepest in America. In contrast, Australia, Britain, Norway, Sweden, and Germany actually exhibit decreasing sectarianism over time.

The most striking findings pertain to out-party hate. Across the eight other nations, the mean rate of change in out-party hate was .004° per year (range: −0.2° to +0.2°) on that 0-to-100° scale. In the United States, the rate of change was −0.6° per year—an increase of approximately six points per decade. By 2017, out-party hate was stronger in America than in any other nation.

Political Sectarianism

Scholars have developed various constructs and measures to capture this nonideological type of polarization (e.g., affective polarization, social polarization, moral polarization). Each captures a subset of the three essential components of *political sectarianism*—an identity-based and moralized preference for one political group over another. This conceptualization incorporates insights from the psychology and neuroscience of moral cognition. Because humans evolved in a sectarian, or “tribal,” context, our intuitions are better-calibrated to address “me-vs.-us” dilemmas pitting our personal interests against those of our sect than to address “us-vs.-them” dilemmas pitting our sect’s interests against those of another sect. They generate worldviews in which *we* are likeable and good while *they* are repugnant and evil.⁵ That said, the definition of who is a “we” and who is a “they” changes across time and context; the application of sectarian psychology to political parties in America has surged in recent decades.

The current integration suggests that a full understanding a political sectarianism requires the simultaneous consideration of three components:

1. *Othering*—the tendency to view opposing partisans, but not copartisans, as fundamentally different or alien to oneself.³
2. *Aversion*—the tendency to dislike and distrust opposing partisans, especially relative to copartisans.¹
3. *Moralization*—the tendency to view opposing partisans as immoral, especially relative to copartisans.⁶

It is the confluence of all three components that makes political sectarianism so corrosive. Viewing opposing partisans as different, or even as dislikable or immoral, may not be problematic

in isolation. But when all three components converge, political losses start to feel like existential threats that must be averted whatever the cost.

Why is Political Sectarianism Surging?

Surging political sectarianism in America is complexly determined; here we focus on three crucial causes. First, in recent decades, the nation's major political parties have sorted in terms of ideological identity and demography. Whereas self-identified liberals and conservatives used to be distributed broadly between the two parties, today people who identify as liberal are overwhelmingly Democrats whereas people who identify as conservative are overwhelmingly Republicans. The parties have also sorted along racial, religious, educational, and geographic lines. By 2020, for example, black women (87% vs. 7%) and the religiously unaffiliated (67% vs. 24%) were far more likely to be Democrats than Republicans; rural southerners (33% vs. 60%) and white evangelicals (17% vs. 78%) exhibited the opposite pattern. Such alignment of ideological identities and demography transforms political orientation into a mega-identity that renders opposing partisans different from, even incomprehensible to, one another.³ It can even dominate other identities, as when partisans alter their self-identified religion, class, and sexual orientation to align with their political identity.

As distinct as Democrats and Republicans actually are today, they nevertheless vastly overestimate such differences. They view opposing partisans as more socially distant, ideologically extreme, contemptuous, and uncooperative than is actually the case, misperceptions that exacerbate the othering aspect of political sectarianism. For example, Republicans estimate that 44% of Democrats belong to a labor union when in reality it is 11%; Democrats estimate that 44% of Republicans earn over \$250,000 per year when in reality it is 2%.⁷

Second, as Americans have grown more receptive to consuming information slanted through a partisan lens, the media ecosystem has exacerbated all three components of political

sectarianism. The decline of the broadcast news era, which prized impartiality, began in the 1980s, especially with the national syndication of Rush Limbaugh's conservative radio program. The ethos of impartiality that CNN espoused when introducing cable news faltered with the launch of the conservative Fox News in 1996 and the liberal pivot of MSNBC a decade later. To be sure, people who are already sectarian selectively seek out congenial news, but consuming it also amplifies their sectarianism.

In recent years, social media companies like Facebook and Twitter have played an influential role in political discourse, exacerbating all three components of political sectarianism. Scholars debate whether such websites polarize users, although suggestive evidence comes from a recent experiment demonstrating that Americans assigned to deactivate their Facebook account for a month became less polarized.⁸ More direct evidence demonstrates that emotional and moralized posts—those containing words like *hate*, *shame*, or *greed*—are especially likely to be retweeted within rather than between partisan networks. Social-media technology employs popularity-based algorithms that tailor content to maximize each user's engagement, exacerbating sectarianism within homogeneous networks because of the contagious power of content that elicits sectarian anger or fear.

Third, in contrast to the equivocal trends among the public, politicians and other political elites have unambiguously polarized recently along ideological lines. These elites increasingly use disciplined messaging to discuss their preferred topics in their preferred manner, leading the public to perceive sharper ideological distinctions between the parties than actually exists.⁹ Part of this change may result from the successes Newt Gingrich and his followers achieved with strongly moralized language in the 1980s and 1990s, after which political elites increasingly doubled down on the rhetoric of moral outrage (e.g., *disgraceful*, *shameful*), further exacerbating all three components of political sectarianism.

The Dark Consequences of Political Sectarianism

Rising political sectarianism has, not surprisingly, increased the social distance between Democrats and Republicans. Compared to a few decades ago, Americans today are much more opposed to dating or marrying an opposing partisan; they are also wary of living near or working for one. They tend to discriminate, as when paying an opposing partisan less than a copartisan for identical job performance or recommending that an opposing partisan be denied a scholarship despite being the more qualified applicant.¹ They are also susceptible to partisan cognition—seeking out, believing, and approving of information more readily when it reflects positively on copartisans or negatively on opposing partisans.¹⁰

Political sectarianism compromises the core government function of *representation*. Because sectarian partisans almost never vote for the opposition, politicians lack the incentive to represent all of their constituents. Straight-ticket voting has grown increasingly widespread. In contested districts, the correlation of the Democratic share of the House vote and the Democratic share of the presidential vote—the correlation between district-level and national representation—surged from a modest .54 in the 1970s to a near-maximum .94 by the 2010s.²

Perhaps most troubling of all, this extreme party loyalty incentivizes politicians to adopt antidemocratic tactics when pursuing electoral or political victories. A recent survey experiment shows that, today, a majority-party candidate in most U.S. House districts could get elected despite openly violating democratic principles like electoral fairness, checks and balances, or civil liberties.¹¹ Voters' decisions to support such a candidate may seem sensible if they believe the harm to democracy from any such decision is small while the consequences of having the loathsome, immoral opposition win the election are catastrophic. However, the accumulation of such choices undermines representative democracy. And a society that pretends to adhere to democratic principles but actually does not is one in which people with resources and influence

can leverage democratic gray zones to impose their will and implement institutional aggression on those without such power.

Bad behavior is not limited to politicians. Sectarianism stimulates activism, but also a willingness to inflict collateral damage in pursuit of political goals and to view copartisans who compromise as apostates. As political sectarianism has surged in recent years, so too has support for violent tactics.

Sectarian partisans are also vulnerable to exploitation. When Russia sought to stoke partisan outrage during America's 2016 elections by creating fake social-media avatars with names like "Blacktivist" and "army_of_jesus," they duped millions of Americans into amplifying the avatars' memes about the depravity of opposing partisans, thereby advancing Russia's efforts to weaken America.

Political sectarianism also undermines the core government function of *competence*—of providing for and protecting the people. Legislators increasingly prioritize partisan purity over the sorts of compromises that appeal to a broad segment of the population, a tendency that creates legislative gridlock. Issues that are nonpartisan become politicized, impeding the nation's ability to make adequate progress on goals like mitigating climate change, reducing the federal debt, and safeguarding democratic rights and institutions. [*Insert Box 2 Around Here.*]

America's response to the Covid-19 pandemic highlights the perils of political sectarianism. By September 2020—six months after cases first started surging—America accounted for over 20% of all Covid-19 deaths worldwide despite making up only 4% of the world's population. This failure is shocking given the conclusion, in an October 2019 report from Johns Hopkins University, that America was better prepared for a pandemic than any other nation. That report failed to account for the sort of sectarianism that would, months later, make mask-wearing a partisan symbol, one favored much more by Democrats than by Republicans. Democrats were also

more likely to prioritize stay-at-home orders despite its massive, immediate economic costs—a pattern that was especially prominent among highly sectarian partisans. This schism, fomented in part by President Trump, pushed toward a disequilibrium in which too few people engaged sufficiently in commerce to stimulate economic growth while too few social-distanced sufficiently to contain the pandemic. The result has been lethal and expensive for Americans across the political spectrum.

Box 2: Is Bias Bipartisan?

The extent to which political sectarianism and its consequences are symmetrical across the political divide is a focus of intense debate. Some scholars argue for symmetry. For example, a recent meta-analysis demonstrates equivalent, and substantial, levels of bias across 51 experiments investigating the tendency to evaluate otherwise identical information more favorably when it supports vs. challenges one's political beliefs or allegiances.¹² In one experiment, liberals and conservatives viewed a film of a political demonstration in which protestors clashed with police. Half of the people in each political group were told that the protestors were pro-gay-rights (a Democratic cause) and the other half were told the protestors were anti-abortion (a Republican cause). Despite viewing the identical film, liberals rated the protesters as more violent when they believed it was an anti-abortion protest rather than a gay-rights protest, whereas conservatives exhibited the opposite pattern.

Other scholars argue for asymmetry, with much of the evidence to date suggesting that Republicans may be more biased than Democrats. Part of the argument is that, in the real world, perceptions and priorities must be calibrated to objective reality, and polling data reveal several cases where the modal Republican belief diverges more than the modal Democratic belief from scientific consensus (e.g., regarding the reality of human-caused climate change). Another part of the argument is that Republicans may have a higher need for order, which motivates them to fit events into a tidy narrative even if doing so requires a distortion of reality.¹³ Such conclusions remain controversial and tentative, although robust evidence does support the conclusion that Republicans politicians have moved further to the right in recent decades than Democrats politicians have moved to the left.

Mitigating Political Sectarianism

Political sectarianism is neither inevitable nor irreversible. When considering promising avenues for intervention, the goal is not to restore America to some halcyon republic of yore.

Many historic episodes of partisan comity—including the 1870s transition from the antiracist Reconstruction era to the racist Redemption era—rested upon antidemocratic institutions and behaviors, including the marginalization and disenfranchisement of women and racial minorities. Indeed, the current divide is so potent in part because battles surrounding sexism and racism have grown strongly partisan.

Rather, the goal of these interventions is to move toward a system in which the public forcefully debates political ideals and policies while resisting tendencies that undermine democracy and human rights. One avenue for intervention focuses on addressing people's faulty perceptions or intuitions. For example, correcting misperceptions of opposing partisans—their demographic characteristics, ideological extremity, and feelings of contempt toward one's copartisans—reduces sectarianism.⁶ Such correction can involve encouraging people to engage in cross-party interactions or to consider their own concrete experiences with opposing partisans, especially a friend, family member, or neighbor. A related idea is to instill intellectual humility, such as by asking people to explain complex policies at a mechanistic level (how, exactly, cap-and-trade systems influence carbon emissions, for example). Relative to people assigned to justify their preexisting policy preference—a more lawyerly orientation—people asked to provide mechanistic explanations gain appreciation for the complexities involved and, consequently, may be less prone toward uninformed extremism. Leaders of civic, religious, and media organizations committed to bridging divides can look to these and other strategies to mitigate the intellectual arrogance that can contribute to political sectarianism.

A second avenue involves altering social-media platforms, although some popular ideas along these lines may be counterproductive. Echo chambers are widely blamed for surging sectarianism, but exposing partisans to content from the opposition may actually exacerbate it,¹⁴ which suggests that simply tweaking algorithms to show partisans more content from the

opposition may not reduce sectarianism. More promising are interventions that encourage people to deliberate about a claim's accuracy, which causes them to evaluate the substance of arguments and reduces their likelihood of sharing false or hyperpartisan content.¹⁵ Another option is to use crowdsourcing to identify outlets that produce such content, producing ratings that are easily scaled and can be incorporated into algorithmic rankings.

A third avenue involves creating incentives for politicians and other elites to reduce their sectarianizing behaviors. People become less divided after observing politicians treating opposing partisans warmly, and nonpartisan statements from leaders can reduce violence. Campaign finance reform may help, as surging donations from partisan extremists in recent decades have contributed to the ideological polarization of elected officials, which in turn intensifies sectarianism among the public. Reducing partisan gerrymandering likely would make representation fairer, generate more robust competition in the marketplace of political ideas, and reduce the extremism of politicians elected to the House of Representatives.

Conclusion

In 1950, the American Political Science Association issued a report expressing concern that America was *insufficiently* polarized. This perspective, which may surprise today's readers, remained dominant in the ensuing decades. But the ideological polarization the Association had in mind has, in recent decades, been eclipsed among the public by political sectarianism. When politics becomes a moralized, identity-based struggle against contemptible foes—when ideals and policies matter less than dominating opponents—government becomes dysfunctional. Viable political strategies focus less on policy-based arguments and more on marginalizing the opposition. Insofar as politicians are pursuing unpopular policies, they are incentivized to destroy the idea of objectivity altogether, undermining the reputation of fact-checkers and mobilizing sectarian loyalists to believe “alternative facts.”

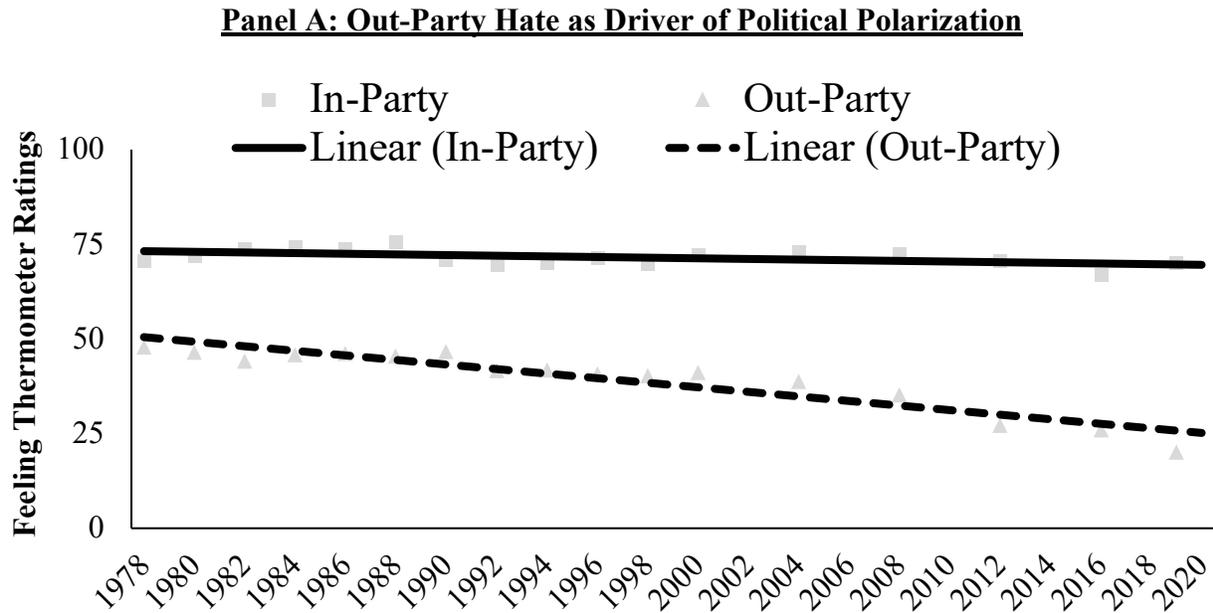
In addition, as political sectarianism becomes more extreme, pushing strong partisans deeper into congenial media enclaves, it may also become self-reinforcing. Once that happens, mitigation efforts become more difficult. Scholars have long argued that a shared threat can bring people together—indeed, some suggest that rising sectarianism in America is due in part to the loss of the Soviet Union as a unifying arch-nemesis—but such threats may do the opposite when sectarianism is extreme. Covid-19 offered a test case. By the summer of 2020, 77% of Americans believed that the nation had grown more divided since the pandemic arrived, a response 2.8 standard deviations higher than the mean of the other 13 nations in the study and 1.6 standard deviations higher than the second-highest nation (Spain). Such findings underscore the urgency of efforts to counteract political sectarianism.

America confronts massive challenges, but the nation's ability to address them decreases as political sectarianism increases. Bolstering how strongly the body politic focuses on political ideas rather than political adversaries is not, on its own, sufficient to address those challenges, but it is likely to be a major step in the right direction. The interventions proposed above offer some promising leads, but any serious effort will require multifaceted efforts to change leadership, media, and democratic systems in ways that are sensitive to human psychology. There are no silver bullets.

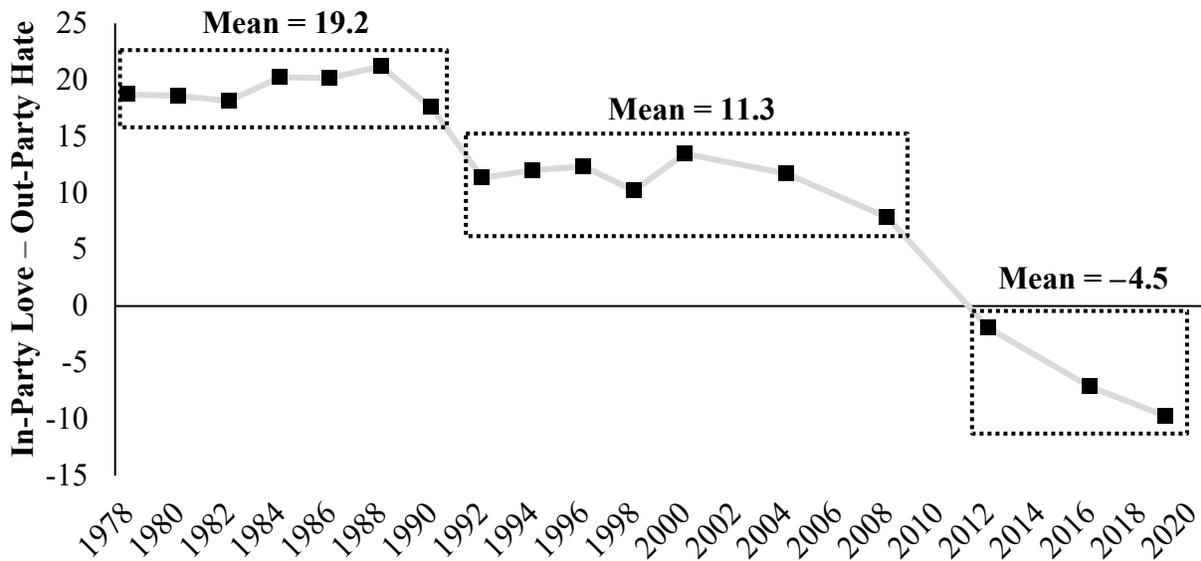
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Figure 1: The Rise of Out-Party Hate



Panel B: The Emergence of Out-Party Hate as a Stronger Force than In-Party Love



Note: With the exception of 2020, all data come from the American National Election Study (ANES), as reported in (1). The ANES did not collect party feeling-thermometer data in 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, or 2018. Because the ANES had not published the 2020 data at the time this article went to print, that year’s estimate comes from a nationally representative survey from 2019.* To calculate the estimates for Panel B, we used the Panel A estimates to calculate the strength of in-party love (in-party score – 50) and out-party hate (50 – out-party score), and then took the difference of those two scores. We thank Sean Westwood for sharing data with us.

* Fishkin, J., Siu, A., Diamond, L., & Bradburn, N. (2020). *Is deliberation an antidote to extreme partisan polarization? Reflections on America in One Room*. Paper presented at the meetings of the American Political Science Association, September 2020 (online).

Additional References

This document includes references for empirical claims in “Political Sectarianism: A Dangerous Cocktail of Othering, Aversion, and Moralization.” Each bulleted statement is an excerpt from the article, and the references appear at the end of the document.

- This aversion to opposing partisans—which, by some metrics, is now stronger than long-standing antipathies surrounding race and religion¹—might be reasonable if out-party hate were closely linked to ideology.
- But surging out-party hate in America today is not driven primarily by political ideas.² Indeed, although there is little doubt that Americans have grown increasingly disdainful toward opposing partisans in recent decades, the evidence that they have polarized in terms of policy preferences is equivocal.³
- Along the way, the causal connection between policy preferences and party loyalty has become warped, with partisans adjusting their policy preferences to align with their party identity,⁴ as when Republicans exhibit a liberal attitude shift after exposure to a clip of President Donald Trump voicing a liberal policy position.⁵
- Scholars have developed various constructs and measures to capture this recent type of interpersonal polarization (e.g., affective polarization, social polarization, moral polarization).^{1 6 7}
- By 2020, for example, black women (87% vs. 7%) and the religiously unaffiliated (67% vs. 24%) were far more likely to be Democrats than Republicans; rural southerners (33% vs. 60%) and white evangelicals (17% vs. 78%) exhibited the opposite pattern.⁸
- It can even dominate other identities, as when partisans alter their self-identified religion, class, and sexual orientation to align with their political identity.⁹
- As distinct as Democrats and Republicans actually are today, they nevertheless vastly overestimate such differences, viewing opposing partisans as more socially distant, ideologically extreme, contemptuous, and uncooperative than is actually the case, misperceptions that exacerbate the othering aspect of political sectarianism.^{10 11 12}
- To be sure, people who are already sectarian selectively seek out congenial news, but consuming it also amplifies their sectarianism.¹³
- Scholars debate whether such websites polarize users, although suggestive evidence comes from a recent experiment demonstrating that Americans assigned to deactivate their Facebook account for a month became less polarized.¹⁴ More direct evidence demonstrates that emotional and moralized posts—those containing words like *hate*, *shame*, or *greed*—are especially likely to be retweeted within rather than between partisan networks.¹⁵ Social-media technology employs popularity-based algorithms that tailor content to maximize each

user's engagement, exacerbating sectarianism within homogeneous networks because of the contagious power of content that elicits sectarian anger or fear.¹⁶

- These elites increasingly use disciplined messaging to discuss their preferred topics in their preferred manner, leading the public to perceive sharper ideological distinctions between the parties than actually exists.^{17 18} Part of this change may result from the successes Newt Gingrich and his followers achieved with strongly moralized language in the 1980s and 1990s, after which political elites increasingly doubled down on the rhetoric of moral outrage (e.g., *disgraceful*, *shameful*), further exacerbating all three components of political sectarianism.^{19 20}
- Bad behavior is not limited to politicians. Sectarianism stimulates activism, but also a willingness to inflict collateral damage in pursuit of political goals¹² and to view copartisans who compromise as apostates.²¹ As political sectarianism has surged in recent years, so too has support for violent tactics.²²
- This failure is shocking given the conclusion, in an October 2019 report from Johns Hopkins, that America was better prepared for a pandemic than any other nation.²³ That report failed to account for the sort of sectarianism that would, months later, make mask-wearing a partisan symbol, one favored much more by Democrats than by Republicans. Democrats were also more likely to prioritize stay-at-home orders despite its massive, immediate economic costs—a pattern that was especially prominent among highly sectarian partisans.^{10 24}
- Some scholars argue for symmetry.^{25 26}
- In one experiment, liberals and conservatives viewed a film of a political demonstration in which protestors clashed with police. Half of the people in each political group were told that the protestors were pro-gay-rights (a Democratic cause) and the other half were told the protestors were anti-abortion (a Republican cause). Despite viewing the identical film, liberals rated the protestors as more violent when they believed it was an anti-abortion protest rather than a gay-rights protest, whereas conservatives exhibited the opposite pattern.²⁷
- Such conclusions remain controversial and tentative, although robust evidence does support the conclusion that Republicans politicians have moved further to the right in recent decades than Democrats politicians have moved to the left.²⁸
- One avenue for intervention focuses on addressing people's faulty perceptions or intuitions. For example, correcting misperceptions of opposing partisans—their demographic characteristics, ideological extremity, and feelings of contempt toward one's copartisans—reduces sectarianism.^{10 11 12} Such correction can involve encouraging people to engage in cross-party interactions^{29 30 31} or to consider their own concrete experiences with opposing partisans, especially a friend, family member, or neighbor.^{10 31}
- Relative to people assigned to justify their preexisting policy preference—a more lawyerly orientation—people asked to provide mechanistic explanations gain appreciation for the complexities involved and, consequently, may be less prone toward uninformed extremism.³²

- More promising are interventions that encourage people to deliberate about a claim's accuracy, which causes them to evaluate the substance of arguments and reduces their likelihood of sharing false or hyperpartisan content.³³
- Another option is to use crowdsourcing to identify outlets that produce such content, producing ratings that are easily scaled and can be incorporated into algorithmic rankings.³⁴
- People become less divided after observing politicians treating opposing partisans warmly,³⁵ and nonpartisan statements from leaders can reduce violence.
- Campaign finance reform may help, as surging donations from partisan extremists in recent decades have contributed to the ideological polarization of elected officials,³⁶ which in turn intensifies sectarianism among the public.¹⁷
- Reducing partisan gerrymandering likely would make representation fairer, generate more robust competition in the marketplace of political ideas, and reduce the extremism of politicians elected to the House of Representatives.³⁷
- By the summer of 2020, 77% of Americans believed that the nation had grown more divided since the pandemic arrived, a response 2.8 standard deviations higher than the mean of the other 13 nations in the study and 1.6 standard deviations higher than the second-highest nation (Spain).³⁸

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