



What Happens When Democrats and Republicans Discuss Partisan Issues?

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Party identification is a powerful part of a person's attitudes and beliefs. Self-identified Democrats, for example, will support a policy endorsed by their party even though they would reject the same policy if it has been endorsed by the Republican Party – and the same dynamic works for Republicans. Scholars who study the influence of party identity on political evaluations find that partisans viscerally react negatively, not just to the other party's policies, but also to fellow citizens who identify with the other party. Evidence for this comes from surveys in which questions are posed to individual respondents.

But what happens when people meet in person, when Democrats and Republicans interact and talk about issues in social settings such as workplaces, family gatherings or neighborhood encounters? Surprisingly, little research has been done on partisan dynamics in such social interactions – even though, when partisans engage in face-to-face discussions about divisive issues, there are possibilities for mutual understanding and rethinking that might not happen when people are asked in isolation to pass judgment on partisan positions or consider proposals coming from across the aisle.

Social Encounters and Political Discussion

Most people prefer to discuss politics in ideologically homogeneous social settings – situations where they are likely to be dealing with others who agree with their views and proclivities. But life does not always unfold that way. Often, people encounter others who are not politically sympathetic. Of course, most social encounters are not focused on politics at all. But issues with partisan implications can still come up in conversation – for example, among co-workers chatting during a break; at bull sessions in college dormitories; as parents stand around during a children's sporting event; or when relatives assemble for a family reunion or celebration. Given the growing diversity in our society and the expansion of interpersonal networks, occasions that bring together people who might disagree about politics are probably becoming ever more common. So what happens in such ideologically disparate encounters?

An Innovative Experimental Study

My research looks at the dynamics of partisan evaluations when Democrats and Republicans interact face-to-face. In an experiment where I could set up various kinds of encounters and measure people's attitudes, I assigned Democrats and Republicans to one of three situations:

- In one situation, individual people sat in isolation to read about the policies of the other party.

- In the second situation, people discussed the other party's policies with fellow partisans – that is, groups of Republicans discussed Democratic policies, and group of Democrats discussed Republican policies.
- In the third situation, people who identified as either Republicans or Democrats discussed the other party's policies in a diverse group that included members of both parties.

I further manipulated the degree to which the partisans felt a strong attachment to their party. Before their discussions took place, I asked some respondents to write a few reasons why they love their preferred party, and I asked others to write out a few reasons why they have problems with their preferred party. This exercise cued stronger or more ambivalent feelings, I assumed, allowing me to test the effect of the various situations on weaker or stronger partisans.

What Bipartisan Discussion Does

After engaging in the various activities to which they were assigned, all participants completed a private, anonymous survey that measured their opinions about the other political party and policies endorsed by that party. By asking for opinions in a private survey, I could ensure that participants did not just give answers they thought others in their group would want to hear.

Here are key results from my experiment:

- As previous scholars have documented, I found that partisans operating in isolation registered extremely negative reactions toward the opposing party. That is, participants who read about the other party but never had a chance to interact with people who identify with that party dismissed the opposition's policies as ineffective. Likewise, these isolated respondents expressed little desire to discuss politics with members of the opposing party.
- When partisans discussed politics only with fellow partisans in ideologically homogeneous groups, negative reactions toward the other party and its policies and members were even more evident in the survey results. In short, homogeneous discussion groups heighten negative evaluations of the opposing party.
- But respondents who took part in the diverse discussion groups ended up registering dramatically modified opinions. After discussing politics with members of the opposite party, respondents expressed far more bipartisan preferences, and were substantially more open-minded about the other party's ideas. Interestingly, I also found that partisans who participated in the diverse groups rated their exchanges as highly enjoyable and requested ideologically diverse discussion groups for future interactions.

To be certain that my results held across the board, I looked at both strong and weak partisans. Even the strongest partisans, I discovered, moved toward more bipartisan positions after participating in diverse discussions. Assuming that my experiment taps into social interactions happening every day across the United States, we can conclude that, at least among ordinary citizens, partisan differences may not be as rigid or unbridgeable as sometimes presumed. To find more common ground, perhaps Americans with different political orientations just need to find ways to spend more time with one another.

Read more in Samara Klar, "**Partisanship in a Social Setting.**" *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 2 (2014).