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About the author: [Yascha Mounk](#) is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of [The Great Experiment](#): Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure.

Americans often lament the rise of “extreme partisanship,” but this is a poor description of political reality: Far from increasing, Americans’ attachment to their political parties has considerably weakened over the past years. Liberals no longer strongly identify with the Democratic Party and conservatives no longer strongly identify with the Republican Party.

What is corroding American politics is, specifically, *negative* partisanship: Although most liberals feel conflicted about the Democratic Party, they really hate the Republican Party. And even though most conservatives feel conflicted about the Republican Party, they really hate the Democratic Party.

America’s political divisions are driven by hatred of an out-group rather than love of the in-group. The question is: Why?

A new study, called “[The Perception Gap](#),” helps provide an answer. More in Common, an advocacy organization devoted to countering extremism that previously published a viral report on [America’s “hidden tribes](#),” set out to understand how political partisans see each other. Researchers asked Democrats to guess how Republicans would answer a range of political questions—and vice versa. (The survey was conducted among a sample of 2,100 U.S. adults the week immediately following the 2018 midterm elections.) What they found is fascinating: Americans’ mental image of the “other side” is a caricature.

According to the Democratic caricature, most Republicans stridently oppose immigration, hold deeply prejudiced views about religious minorities, and are blind to the existence of racism or sexism. Asked to guess what share of Republicans believe that immigration can strengthen

America so long as it is “properly controlled,” for example, Democrats estimated about half; actually, nearly nine in 10 agreed with this sentiment.

Democrats also estimated that four in 10 Republicans believe that “many Muslims are good Americans,” and that only half recognize that “racism still exists in America.” In reality, those figures were two-thirds and four in five.

Unsurprisingly, Republicans are also prone to caricature Democrats. For example, Republicans approximated that only about half of Democrats are “proud to be American” despite the country’s problems. Actually, more than four in five Democrats said they are. Similarly, Republicans guessed that fewer than four in 10 Democrats reject the idea of open borders. Actually, seven in 10 said they do.

If the reasons for mutual hatred are rooted as much in mutual misunderstanding as in genuine differences of values, that suggests Americans’ divisions should in principle be easy to remedy. It’s all just a matter of education.

Unfortunately, the “Perception Gap” study suggests that neither the media nor the universities are likely to remedy Americans’ inability to hear one another: It found that the best educated and most politically interested Americans are *more* likely to vilify their political adversaries than their less educated, less tuned-in peers.

Americans who rarely or never follow the news are surprisingly good at estimating the views of people with whom they disagree. On average, they misjudge the preferences of political adversaries by less than 10 percent. Those who follow the news most of the time, by contrast, are terrible at understanding their adversaries. On average, they believe that the share of their political adversaries who endorse extreme views is about 30 percent higher than it is in reality.

Perhaps because institutions of higher learning tend to be dominated by liberals, Republicans who have gone to college are not more likely to caricature their ideological adversaries than those who dropped out of high school. But among Democrats, education seems to make the problem much worse. Democrats who have a high-school degree suffer from a greater perception gap than those who don't. Democrats who went to college harbor greater misunderstandings than those who didn't. And those with a postgrad degree have a way more skewed view of Republicans than anybody else.

It is deeply worrying that Americans now have so little understanding of their political adversaries. It is downright disturbing that the very institutions that ought to help us become better informed may actually be deepening our mutual incomprehension.

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