SOCIAL SCIENCE

Political sectarianism in America

A poisonous cocktail of othering, aversion, and moralization poses a threat to democracy

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Political polarization, a concern in many countries, is especially acrimonious in the United States (see the first box). For decades, scholars have studied polarization as an ideological matter—how strongly Democrats and Republicans diverge vis-à-vis political ideals and policy goals. Such competition among groups in the marketplace of ideas is a hallmark of a healthy democracy. But more recently, researchers have identified a second type of polarization, one focusing less on triumphs of ideas than on dominating the abhorrent supporters of the opposing party (1). This literature has produced a 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 three core ingredients: othering, aversion, and moralization. We then consider the causes of political sectarianism and its consequences for U.S. society—especially the threat it poses to democracy. Finally, we propose interventions for minimizing its most corrosive aspects.

ASCENDANCE OF POLITICAL HATRED

Democrats and Republicans—the 85% of U.S. citizens who do not identify as pure independents—have grown more contemptuous of opposing partisans for decades, and at similar rates [see supplementary materials (SM)]. Only recently, however, has this aversion exceeded their affection for copartisans. On a "feeling thermometer" scale ranging from cold (0°) to neutral (50°) to warm (100°), affect toward copartisans has consistently hovered in the 70° to 75° range. By contrast, affect toward opposing partisans has plummeted from 48° in the 1970s to 20° today (see the figure, top panel). And cold feelings toward the out-party now exceed warm feelings to-

ward the in-party (see the figure, bottom panel). Out-party hate has also become more powerful than in-party love as a predictor of voting behavior (2), and by some metrics, it exceeds long-standing antipathies around race and religion (SM).

This aversion to opposing partisans might make strategic sense if partisan identity served as a strong proxy for political ideas. But given that sectarianism is not driven primarily by such ideas (SM), holding opposing partisans in contempt on the basis of their identity alone precludes innovative cross-party solutions and mutually beneficial compromises. This preclusion is unfortunate, as common ground remains plentiful. Indeed, despite the clear evidence that partisans have grown increasingly disdainful of one another, 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 (SM). For example, a recent experiment demonstrated that Republicans exhibit a liberal attitude shift after exposure to a clip of President Donald Trump voicing a liberal policy position (SM); there is little evidence to suggest that Democrats are immune to analogous shifts in response to their own political leaders. Overall, the severity of political conflict has grown increasingly divorced from the magnitude of policy disagreement (4).

POLITICAL SECTARIANISM

In the past decade, political scientists have introduced various constructs to capture this nonideological type of polarization, including "affective polarization" (1) and "social polarization" (4). Scholars from psychology and other disciplines have introduced constructs, such as "tribalism" (SM), to flesh out its social-psychological properties.

We propose here a superordinate construct, political sectarianism—the tendency to adopt a moralized identification with one political group and against another. Whereas the foundational metaphor for tribalism is kinship, the foundational metaphor for political sectarianism is religion, which evokes analogies focusing less on genetic relatedness than on strong faith in the moral correctness and superiority of one's sect.

Political identity is secondary to religion in traditional forms of sectarianism, but it is primary in political sectarianism. In the United States today, even though Democrats and Republicans differ on average in terms of religious affiliation, their schism is fundamentally political rather than religious. It is, in this sense, quite distinct from the Sunni-versus-Shia sectarian schisms that characterize politics in some Muslim-majority nations.

Political sectarianism consists of three core ingredients: othering—the tendency to view opposing partisans as essentially different or alien to oneself; aversion—the tendency to dislike and distrust opposing partisans; and moralization—the tendency to view opposing partisans as iniquitous. It is the confluence of these ingredients that makes sectarianism so corrosive in the political sphere. Viewing opposing partisans as different, or even as dislikable or immoral, may not be problematic in isolation. But when all three converge, political losses can feel like existential threats that must be averted—whatever the cost.

WHY SECTARIANISM IS SURGING

Rising political sectarianism in the United States is multiply determined; here we con-

On American exceptionalism

A recent study offers valuable international perspective on political polarization, leveraging data from 1975 through 2017 in nine Western democracies to examine feelings toward copartisans and opposing partisans. The study controls statistically for the number of parties and offers a valuable, albeit noncomprehensive, comparison set (13).

Four nations—America, Canada, New Zealand, and Switzerland—exhibit increasing sectarianism over time, with the rate steepest in America. By contrast, Australia, Britain, Norway, Sweden, and Germany exhibit decreasing sectarianism over time. The most notable findings pertain to out-party hate [increasingly "frigid" evaluations of opposing partisans, via a "feeling thermometer" (see main text)]. Across the eight other nations, the mean rate of change in out-party hate was 0.004° per year (range: −0.2° to +0.2°) on the 0°-to-100° scale. In the United States, the rate of change was −0.6° per year. By 2017, out-party hate was stronger in America than in any other nation.

The rise of out-party hate

With the exception of 2020, all data come from the American National Election Study (ANES), as reported in (1). To calculate the estimates for the lower panel, we used upper-panel estimates to compute, relative to the neutral point on the feeling thermometer, 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. See supplementary materials for details.

Warmth toward the opposing party (out-party) has diminished for decades
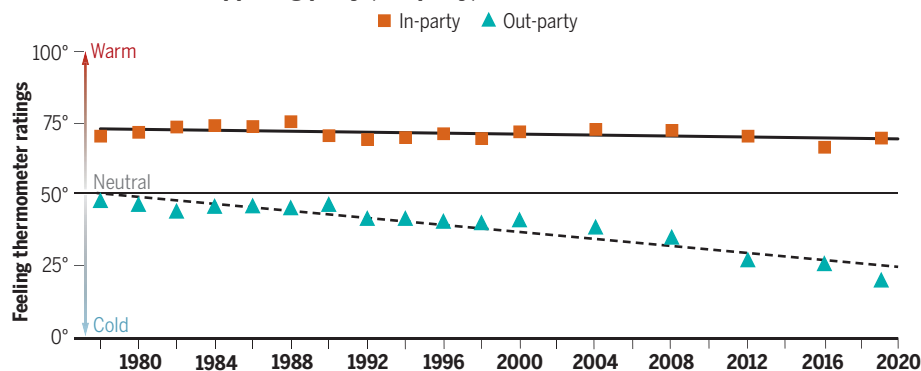
Out-party hate has emerged as a stronger force than in-party love
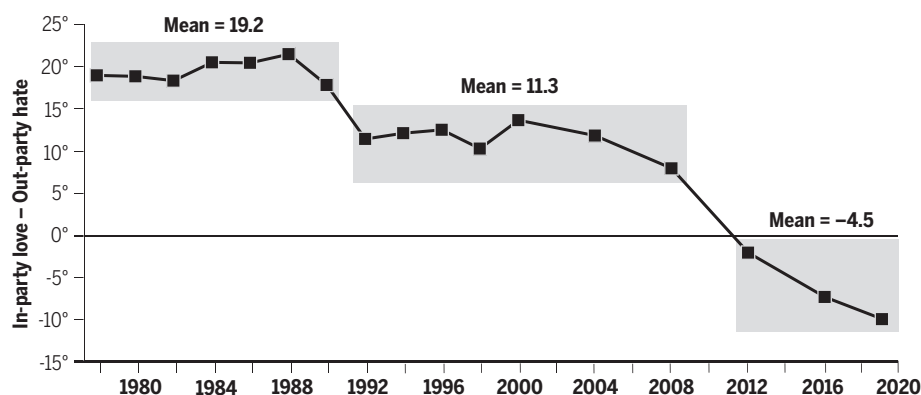
sider three crucial causes. First, in recent decades, the nation's major political parties have sorted in terms of ideological identity and demography. Whereas self-identified liberals and conservatives used to be distributed broadly between the two parties, today the former are overwhelmingly Democrats and the latter are overwhelmingly Republicans (SM). The parties also have sorted along racial, religious, educational, and geographic lines. Although far from absolute, 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 (4). This mega-identity can grow so powerful that it changes other identities, as when partisans alter their self-identified religion, class, or sexual orientation to align with their political identity (SM).

As distinct as Democrats and Republicans actually are today, partisans nevertheless vastly overestimate such differences. They view opposing partisans as more socially distant, ideologically extreme, po-

litically engaged, contemptuous, and uncooperative than is actually the case (5) (SM), thereby exacerbating political sectarianism. For example, Republicans estimate that 32% of Democrats are LGBT when in reality it is 6%; Democrats estimate that 38% of Republicans earn over $250,000 per year when in reality it is 2% (6).

Second, as Americans have grown more receptive to consuming information slanted through a partisan lens, the media ecosystem has inflamed political sectarianism. The decline of the broadcast news era, during which impartiality was prized, began in the 1980s, driven in part by the Reagan administration's termination of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) "fairness doctrine" in 1987. This doctrine, introduced in 1949, required that broadcasters discuss controversial topics in a manner that the FCC assesses as unbiased. Among the first media figures to leverage the demise of the fairness doctrine was Rush Limbaugh, whose influential conservative radio program went into national syndication in 1988 (SM). The ethos of impartiality that CNN espoused when intro-

ducing cable news faltered with the launch of the conservative Fox News in 1996 and the liberal pivot of MSNBC a decade later. People who are already sectarian selectively seek out congenial news, but consuming such content also amplifies their sectarianism (SM).

In recent years, social media companies like Facebook and Twitter have played an influential role in political discourse, intensifying political sectarianism. Scholars from sociology, political science, economics, psychology, and computational social science debate whether such web platforms create polarizing echo chambers (7) (SM). However, a recent field experiment offers intriguing evidence that Americans who deactivate their Facebook account become less politically polarized (8). In addition, emotional and moralized posts—those containing words like "hate," "shame," or "greed"—are especially likely to be retweeted within rather than between partisan networks (9). Social-media technology employs popularity-based algorithms that tailor content to maximize user engagement, increasing sectarianism within homogeneous networks (SM), in part because of the contagious power of content that elicits sectarian fear or indignation.

Third, in contrast to the equivocal ideological-polarization trends among the public, politicians and other political elites have unambiguously polarized recently on ideological grounds, with Republican politicians moving further to the right than Democratic politicians have moved to the left (SM). This ideological divergence is driven in part by extreme economic inequality in America today, especially in conjunction with candidates becoming increasingly reliant on ideologically extreme donors. As politicians chase campaign dollars, these extreme voices garner disproportionate influence (SM).

The ideological divergence of political elites contributes to political sectarianism, especially as these individuals increasingly use disciplined messaging to discuss their preferred topics in their preferred manner (SM). Such messaging leads the public to perceive sharper ideological distinctions between the parties than actually exists, which inflames sectarianism (SM). In addition, Newt Gingrich and his followers achieved electoral success with strongly moralized language in the 1980s and 1990s, inspiring political elites on both sides to double down on the rhetoric

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of moral outrage (e.g., "disgraceful," "shameful"), further exacerbating sectarianism (SM).

These three trends—identity alignment, the rise of partisan media, and elite ideological polarization—have contributed to radically different sectarian narratives about American society and politics. Although the content of these narratives is entirely different across the political divide, their structure is similar: The other side cheats, so our side would be foolish to adhere to long-standing democratic norms. These narratives, which partisans experience less as stories than as truth (SM), increase their willingness to sacrifice those norms in pursuit of partisan ends.

DARK CONSEQUENCES
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 motivated partisan cognition—seeking out, believing, and approving of information more readily when it reflects positively on copartisans or negatively on opposing partisans (10) (SM)—although scholars debate whether such tendencies are equally strong among Democrats and Republicans (see the second box).

These manifestations of political sectarianism echo those that emerge from religious sectarianism. What is distinctive about political sectarianism—beyond its largely nontheological foundation—is the immediacy of its links to governance. 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 association of district-level with national representation—surged from 0.54 in the 1970s to 0.94 by the 2010s (2).

Perhaps most troubling of all, the political sectarianism of the public incentivizes politicians to adopt antidemocratic tactics when pursuing electoral or political victories. A recent experiment shows that, today, a majority-party candidate in most U.S. House districts—Democrat or Republican—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 vile 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 who possess resources and influence can leverage democratic gray zones to impose their will on those who do not.

Sectarianism stimulates activism (SM), but also a willingness to inflict collateral damage in pursuit of political goals (SM) and to view copartisans who compromise as apostates (SM). As political sectarianism has surged in recent years, so too has support for violent tactics (SM). In addition, highly sectarian partisans are vulnerable to exploitation. In 2016, Russia sought to stoke partisan outrage during America's election by creating fake social-media avatars with names like "Blacktivist" and "army_of_jesus." These efforts succeeded in duping sectarian extremists—especially those who were older and more conservative than average—into amplifying the avatars' memes about the depravity of opposing partisans (SM). In doing so, these partisans served as pawns in Russia's efforts to weaken America.

Political sectarianism also undermines the core government function of competence—of providing for and protecting the people. Members of Congress increasingly prioritize partisan purity over the sorts of compromises that appeal to a large proportion of the population, a tendency that creates legislative gridlock. Issues that are not inherently partisan become politicized, impeding the ability to make progress on goals like miti-

gating climate change, reducing the federal debt, and safeguarding democratic rights.

America's response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic highlights the perils of political sectarianism. An October 2019 report from Johns Hopkins University suggested that America was better prepared for a pandemic than any other nation (SM), but that report failed to account for the sort of political sectarianism that would, months later, make mask-wearing a partisan symbol, one favored more by Democrats than by Republicans. Democrats were also more likely to prioritize stay-at-home orders despite their massive, immediate eco-

nomic cost—a pattern that was especially prominent among highly sectarian partisans (SM). 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.

MITIGATING 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. As exemplified by the 1870s transition from the relatively antiracist Reconstruction era to the deeply racist Redemption era, many historic episodes of partisan comity rested upon bipartisan support for (or at least acquiescence to) antidemocratic institutions and behaviors, including the marginalization and disenfranchisement of women and racial minorities. The current divide is so potent in part because battles surrounding sexism and racism have grown strongly partisan.

Is motivated partisan cognition bipartisan?

The extent to which each side exhibits motivated partisan (or biased) cognition is a focus of ongoing debate. Some scholars argue for symmetry (SM). For example, a recent meta-analysis demonstrates equivalent levels of motivated partisan cognition across 51 experiments investigating the tendency to evaluate otherwise identical information more favorably when it supports versus challenges one's political beliefs or allegiances (14). In an illustrative experiment, liberals and conservatives viewed a film clip of a political demonstration in which protestors clashed with police. Despite viewing the identical clip, liberals rated the protesters as more violent when they believed it was an anti-abortion protest (a conservative cause) rather than a gay-rights protest (a liberal cause), whereas conservatives exhibited the opposite pattern (SM).

Other scholars argue for asymmetry. For example, some evidence suggests that, relative to Democrats, Republicans have a higher need for order and greater trust in their gut-level intuitions. Such tendencies appear to motivate them to favor explanations that are straightforward and intuitive rather than complex and abstract, even when the latter types of explanation might be more accurate (15) (SM). Such findings are representative of the existing evidence, but conclusions remain tentative.

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. Given that substantial swaths of American society (including many who identify as Democrat or Republican) are fed up with surging sectarianism (SM), dedicated efforts to mitigate it may well land in fertile soil. Such efforts must circumvent the sectarian true believers, profiteers, and chaos-seekers who benefit from stoking sectarianism. These actors contribute directly to political sectarianism, and they leverage the government sclerosis caused by political sectarianism to derail efforts to address structural sources of that sectarianism, such as economic inequities and biased electoral procedures (SM).

Nonetheless, scholars have begun to identify procedures that can potentially mitigate political sectarianism. These include efforts to help Americans comprehend opposing partisans regardless of their level of agreement, such as by focusing on commonalities rather than differences (e.g., "we're all Americans"; SM) or communicating in the moral language of the other side (e.g., when liberals frame the consequences of climate change in terms of sanctity violations; SM).

Here, we consider three avenues for intervention that hold particular promise for ameliorating political sectarianism. The first addresses people's faulty perceptions or intuitions. For example, correcting misperceptions of opposing partisans, such as their level of hostility toward one's copartisans, reduces sectarianism (5) (SM). Such correction efforts can encourage people to engage in cross-party interactions (SM) or to consider their own positive experiences with opposing partisans, especially a friend, family member, or neighbor. Doing so can reduce the role of motivated partisan reasoning in the formation of policy opinions (SM).

A related idea is to instill intellectual humility, such as by asking people to explain policy preferences at a mechanistic level—for example, why do they favor their position on a national flat tax or on carbon emissions. According to a recent study, relative to people assigned to the more lawyerly approach of justifying their preexisting policy preferences, those asked to provide mechanistic explanations gain appreciation for the complexities involved (SM). Leaders of civic, religious, and media organizations committed to bridging divides can look to such strategies to reduce intellectual self-righteousness 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 simply tweaking algorithms to show partisans more content from the opposition may aggravate sectarianism rather than reducing it (7). More promising are interventions that encourage people to deliberate about the accuracy of claims on social media, which causes them to evaluate the substance of arguments and reduces their likelihood of sharing false or hyperpartisan content (12) (SM). Another option is to use crowdsourcing to identify such content and the outlets that emit it, relying on users' ratings of trustworthiness to augment the efforts of professional fact-checkers. Such information can be incorporated into algorithmic rankings to reduce the presence of false or hyperpartisan content in people's news feeds (SM).

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, especially by eliminating huge contributions from ideological extremists (SM). Reducing partisan gerrymandering likely would make representation fairer, generate more robust competition in the marketplace of political ideas, and send fewer extremists to the House of Representatives (SM).

A FIERCE URGENCY

In 1950, the American Political Science Association issued a report expressing concern that America was insufficiently polarized, a perspective that remained dominant in the ensuing decades (SM). Ideological differentiation is an essential feature of party-based democracy, sharpening debates on important topics. Because most people lack the expertise required to make informed judgments on specific policies, divergent and internally coherent party platforms function as helpful heuristics that voters can use to prioritize their preferred policies and hold politicians accountable.

But the ideological polarization the American Political Science Association had in mind has, in recent decades, been eclipsed among the public by political sectarianism. When politics becomes an identity-based struggle against depraved opponents—when ideals and policies matter less than dominating foes—government becomes dysfunctional. Viable political strategies focus less on policy-based arguments and more on marginalizing the opposition, with false smears and antidemocratic tactics if necessary. 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."

As political sectarianism grows more extreme, pushing strong partisans deeper into congenial media enclaves that reinforce their narratives of moral righteousness, it may also become self-reinforcing, rendering mitigation efforts 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 (SM). By the summer of 2020, 77% of Americans believed that the nation had grown more divided since the pandemic arrived that winter, a response 2.8 standard deviations higher than the mean of the 13 other nations in the study and 1.6 standard deviations higher than the second-highest nation (Spain). Such findings underscore the urgent need to counteract sectarianism before it grows more poisonous.

Political sectarianism cripples a nation's ability to confront challenges. Bolstering the emphasis on political ideas rather than political adversaries is not a sufficient solution, 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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