

Affective Polarization and American Youth

With the presidential election coming up in November, there is heightened antagonism surrounding the political climate. When speaking about polarization, most tend to think of ideological polarization, which is driven by policy differences. However, affective polarization is concerned with the more complex dynamic of having an emotionally charged dislike for opposing partisans.¹ In a 2022 study conducted by the Pew Research Center, it was reported that Republicans and Democrats are increasingly likely to describe people associated with the opposite party as “closed-minded, dishonest, immoral and unintelligent.”² As the traditional divide of Republican and Democrat evolves, it is crucial to understand the importance of constructive political discourse and to set it into motion.

According to a study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Americans are not as ideologically different as commonly thought, but affective polarization continues to exacerbate the divide between people.³ Additional studies have shown that affective polarization is propelled by misconceptions about the other party.⁴ These misconceptions often stem from selective media exposure, where viewers actively favor information that aligns with their preconceived views, while choosing to avoid opposing viewpoints.⁵ Increasingly, there is a critical need for media literacy and bipartisan engagement. It was found that media literacy tools allowed citizens to make informed judgements on content quality and trustworthiness, focusing less on sensational headlines and emotions.⁶

The Pew Research Center also reports that “Younger adults are more likely to hold an unfavorable view of both political parties than those who are older.”⁷ This trend raises questions concerning the future of youth participation in politics. In recent years, increasing political activism has been seen on college campuses across the country. At the same time, researchers from Tufts University found that less than fifty percent of youth surveyed felt well-qualified enough to participate in politics.⁸ During the 2020 Presidential Election, the United States experienced the highest voter turnout since 1992.⁹ Even so, eligible citizens aged 18-34 had the lowest turnout out of any age group.¹⁰ The importance of youth participation is critical, as they are the unique demographic that holds influence over the country’s future. BridgeUSA is actively encouraging this demographic through facilitating constructive dialogue in high schools and colleges throughout the country.

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