



## Mark Mellman: Gay Dems and a rich GOP?



By Mark Mellman - 06/02/15 07:10 PM EDT

Getty Images

Strange behavior has engulfed the Capitol over the last few weeks.

Intense conflict remains over trade and NSA surveillance, but the alliances were not dictated exclusively by partisanship. The failure of partisanship to act as the singular divide defining the conflict was the strange element.

Does it portend a decline in partisanship?

Not likely, though voters would like to think so. After all, they believe the intense partisan fervor animating our politics is purely a function of politicians' behavior, not their own beliefs and values.

They're wrong. It's yet another example of people misunderstanding what's going on in their own heads: Partisan hostility is alive and well among average voters.

Perhaps the most straightforward evidence comes from the American National Election Studies, which asks respondents to rate their feelings about both parties on a 0-100 feeling thermometer. Over the decades, Republicans and Democrats have consistently rated their own party warmly at about 70 degrees. And feelings about the "other" party have grown increasingly negative in recent years.

In 1980, the average rating by Democrats of Republicans and by Republicans of Democrats was close to 50, the neutral point. By 2012, that average dropped a huge distance — nearly 20 points — to about 30.

Pew data tells a similar story, with different numbers. In 1994, 16 percent of Democrats had a "very unfavorable" opinion of Republicans, while a similar 17 percent of Republicans held "very unfavorable" views about Democrats. Last year "very unfavorable" feelings about the other party skyrocketed to 38 percent among Democrats and 43 percent among Republicans.

My friend professor Shanto Iyengar of Stanford University and his colleagues administered the oft-used implicit association test, which measures unconscious prejudice, to 2,000 adults. They found people's party bias to be greater than even their racial bias.

To find out whether these attitudes had any potential impact on behavior, the same researchers asked more than 1,000 people to determine which of several high school seniors should be awarded college scholarships, unrelated to politics, based on the students' resumes. Some of the resumes offered racial cues ("president of the African-American Student Association") while others had political ones ("president of the Young Republicans").

Again, race mattered, but partisanship appeared to matter even more.

Both Democrats and Republicans selected the potential scholarship recipient affiliated with their party about 80 percent of the time, despite the task having no relationship to politics. Partisanship even overpowered clear indicators of merit embedded in the resumes.

Berkeley political scientist Douglas Ahler and Georgetown researcher Gaurav Sood attribute some of the antipathy toward members of the opposing party to stereotypically exaggerated perceptions of the social composition of the parties.

Though only about 6 percent of Democrats are atheists or agnostics, Republicans think almost 30 percent of Democrats fall in that category. About 22 percent of Democrats are black, but Republicans think the number is over 40 percent. Just about 5 percent of Democrats identify as LGBT, but Republicans think it's over 35 percent. Union members comprise about 11 percent of Democrats, but Republicans think they are nearly 40 percent.

Democrats fall prey to the same kind of exaggerations. Only about 2 percent of Republicans earn more than \$250,000 a year, but Democrats believe it's 38 percent. A little over 20 percent of Republicans are older than 65, though Democrats estimate the number at over 40 percent.

Partisans see their political opponents as not just sharing different ideologies or policy prescriptions but as members of very different social groups, often antithetical to their own values. Republicans see Democrats as black, gay, atheist union members, while Democrats look at the GOP as being made up of seniors and the richest 3 percent of America.

With partisan antipathy and stereotypes so deeply ingrained in the electorate, it's hard to imagine partisanship abating any time soon, whether on the floor of Congress or in constituents' living rooms.

*Mellman is president of The Mellman Group and has worked for Democratic candidates and causes since 1982. Current clients include the minority leader of the Senate and the Democratic whip in the House.*

The Hill 1625 K Street, NW Suite 900 Washington DC 20006 | 202-628-8500 tel | 202-628-8503 fax

The contents of this site are ©2015 Capitol Hill Publishing Corp., a subsidiary of News Communications, Inc.

---