

human cooperation, like the nation-state or religions. Sometimes it leads to hatred, violence, even genocide. And sometimes it just leads to everyone gathering on Sunday to watch two groups of people dressed in particular colors collide with each other on a lush green field.

I worry, writing this section, that some will read it and believe I am dismissing the power, or condescending to the experience, of sports rivalries. So let me say this clearly: my point is just the opposite. Sports are such a powerful force in human society precisely because they harness primal instincts that pulse through our psyche. The fact that teams can command such deep, violent loyalty based on nothing but being in the same town as fans—even as professional sports teams are transparently cynical in their loyalties, even as they demand stadium subsidies to locate and tax breaks to remain in the towns they profess to love, even as the players leave the moment another team offers a better deal—shows that we are no different from Tajfel's boys: a group does not have to be based on objectively important criteria for it to become an important part of our self-identity and for it to inspire loathing of those who stand outside its boundaries.

Another objection to this argument might be that sports are, well, sports. They are competition distilled to its purest form. They construct a world where for one side to win the other must lose. It's unfair to compare that with politics, isn't it?

Politics is a team sport

In 2015, Patrick R. Miller and Pamela Johnston Conover published a paper entitled "Red and Blue States of Mind." The paper looks

at how Republicans and Democrats—as well as independents who lean toward one party or the other—act during elections. What motivates them? What do they feel? What drives them to participate? "The behavior of partisans resembles that of sports team members acting to preserve the status of their teams rather than thoughtful citizens participating in the political process for the broader good," the paper concludes.¹³ Yikes.

The authors tested behavior in two stages. In the first, they looked at partisan action through the prism of feelings of anger toward, and rivalry with, the other party. Using mountains of survey data and pre- and postelection polling of the same groups, they tested the effect issue positions, ideology, age, education, political knowledge, church attendance, gender, partisan identity, race, and more had on a person's likelihood of feeling fury and competition in the midst of an election.

They found that while high-minded factors like policy ideas and ideology played some role in how partisans felt, the overwhelming driver was the strength of partisan identity. "Elections accentuate the team mentality of party identifiers, pushing them repeatedly to make 'us-them' comparisons between Democrats and Republicans that draw attention to what will be lost—status—if the election is not won," write Miller and Conover. "This results in both rivalry and anger."

The next question Miller and Conover considered was whether those feelings led to actions. So they ran a similar test, looking at how the same host of political forces, identities, and ideas drove a Republican or Democrat's likelihood of helping on a campaign or actually turning out to vote. Here, again, partisan identity dominated when compared to abstractions like issue positions or ideology. But then Miller and Conover did something interesting: they asked people to reflect on how much anger, rivalry, and incivility they felt toward the other side. Once they added

those answers into their data, the effect of every other political factor plummeted.

How we feel matters much more than what we think, and in elections, the feelings that matter most are often our feelings about the other side. Negative partisanship rears its head again.

The big picture that emerges from this paper is that the people actually driving elections—the people knocking on doors, working for campaigns, and turning out to vote—are driven more by group rivalry than by tax policy. Miller and Conover are crisp on this point: “When partisans endure meetings, plant yard signs, write checks, and spend endless hours volunteering, what is likely foremost in their minds is that they are furious with the opposing party and want intensely to avoid losing to it—not a specific issue agenda. They are fired up team members on a mission to defeat the other team.”

A 2016 Pew survey backed up these findings and their centrality to politics.¹⁴ Among Republicans, moving from a “mostly unfavorable” view of the Democratic Party to a “very unfavorable” view increased the likelihood of regular voting by 12 points. By contrast, developing a deeper affection for the Republican Party increased regular voting among Republicans by only 6 points. Democrats didn’t show the same effect—increases in negative and positive partisanship drove voting at similar rates.

But the data turned even starker as Pew moved up the ladder of engagement. When Republicans were asked whether they had contributed money to a candidate or group in the past few years, a very unfavorable view of Democrats raised the likelihood by 11 points, while a very favorable view of Republicans increased it by only 3. Among Democrats, a very unfavorable view of Republicans increased it by 8 points, while a very favorable view of their own party didn’t increase it at all.

All of this points toward an important principle: the most-engaged experience politics differently than everyone else. In

the previous chapter I mentioned the book *Open versus Closed*, which finds that the least-engaged voters tend to look at politics through the lens of material self-interest (“what will this policy do for me?”) while the most-engaged look at politics through the lens of identity (“what does support for this policy position say about me?”).

This helps illuminate a long-running debate, particularly on the left, about whether working class voters who pull the lever for Republicans are betraying their self-interest in voting for a party that will cut taxes on the rich and break the unions that protect the poor. What Johnston, Lavine, and Federico find is that as people become more involved and invested in politics, the “self-interest” they’re looking to satisfy changes. It’s a mistake to imagine our bank accounts are the only reasonable drivers of political action. As we become more political, we become more interested in politics as a means of self-expression and group identity. “It is not that citizens are unable to recognize their interests,” they write, “rather, it is that material concerns are often irrelevant to the individual’s goals when forming a policy opinion.”¹⁵

Politicians, of course, are not equally responsive to all their constituents. They are most concerned about the most engaged: the people who will vote for them, volunteer for them, donate to them. And the way to make more of that kind of voter isn’t just to focus on how great you are. It’s to focus on how bad the other side is. Nothing brings a group together like a common enemy. Remove the fury and fear of a real opponent, and watch the enthusiasm drain from your supporters.

In 2017, Texas congressman Beto O’Rourke launched a long-shot Senate bid against Ted Cruz, one of the Democratic Party’s *bêtes noires*. O’Rourke’s candidacy was a sensation. He raised the most money ever recorded for a Senate race. He packed rafters, went viral. On Election Day, Beyoncé posted a photo on