

# **The Real Divide in America Is Between Political Junkies and Everyone Else**

**By Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan**

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The common view of American politics today is of a clamorous divide between Democrats and Republicans, an unyielding, inevitable clash of harsh partisan polarization.

But that focus obscures another, enormous gulf — the gap between those who follow politics closely and those who don't. Call it the “attention divide.”

What we found is that most Americans — upward of 80 percent to 85 percent — follow politics casually or not at all. Just 15 percent to 20 percent follow it closely (the people we call “deeply involved”): the group of people who monitor everything from [covfefe](#) to the politics of “[Cuties](#).”

At the start of the year (i.e., pre-pandemic), we asked people to name the two most important issues facing the country. As expected, we found some clear partisan divides: For example, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to cite illegal immigration as an important issue.

But on a number of other issues, we found that Americans fall much less neatly into partisan camps. For example, Democrats and Republicans who don't follow politics closely believe that low hourly wages are one of the most important problems facing the country. But for hard partisans, the issue barely registers.

Partisan Republicans were most likely to say drug abuse was the most important problem facing the country. But less-attentive Republicans ranked it second to last, and they were also concerned about the deficit and divisions between Democrats and Republicans.

Among Democrats, the political junkies think the influence of wealthy donors and interest groups is an urgent problems. But less-attentive Democrats are 25 percentage points more likely to name moral decline as an important problem facing the country — a problem partisan Democrats never even mention.

These gaps extend beyond issues to feelings about the other party. Hard partisans are twice as likely as people who pay less attention to politics to say that they would be unhappy if their child married someone of the opposing party.

Hard partisans are also more likely to speak out about these political likes and dislikes. Almost 45 percent of people who are deeply involved say they frequently share their views on social media — in some cases, daily. It's only 11 percent for those without a politics habit. To put this in perspective, a [Pew study](#) finds that 10 percent of Twitter users are responsible for 97 percent of all tweets about politics.

This gap between the politically indifferent and hard, loud partisans exacerbates the perception of a hopeless division in American politics because it is the partisans who define what it means to engage in politics. When a Democrat imagines a Republican, she is not imagining a co-worker who mostly posts cat pictures and happens to vote differently; she is more likely imagining a co-worker [she had to mute on Facebook](#) because the Trump posts became too hard to bear.

We see this effect in a [study](#) we did with three other political scientists, James Druckman, Samara Klar and Matthew Levendusky. We asked a group of over 3,000 Americans to describe either themselves or members of the other party. Only 27 percent of these people said that they discuss politics frequently; a majority consider themselves moderates. But nearly 70 percent of these people believe that a typical member of the other party talks about politics incessantly and is definitely not moderate.

For partisans, politics is a morality play, a struggle of good versus evil. But most Americans just see two angry groups of people bickering over issues that may not always seem pressing or important.

How can politics better match the opinions of a majority of Americans? The fact is, it's not an easy problem to solve. We can try to give the hardened partisans less voice in the news. Featuring people who exemplify partisan conflict and extremist ideas elevates their presence in politics (though of course by definition, it is the partisans who are most closely watching the news who are also most likely to give their opinions). This is particularly true of social media: What a vocal minority shares on social media is not the opinion of the public. Yet such political tweets, as the political

communication scholar Shannon McGregor finds, are [increasingly making their way into news coverage](#) as stand-ins for public opinion.

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