

# Why Hatred and ‘Othering’ of Political Foes Has Spiked to Extreme Levels | Scientific American

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In 1950 the American Political Science Association issued a report expressing concern that Americans exhibited an insufficient degree of political polarization. What a difference a new millennium makes. As we approach 2020’s Election Day, the U.S. political landscape has become a Grand Canyon separating blue and red Americans.

So why is this happening? In a review of studies published today in the journal *Science*, 15 prominent researchers from across the country characterize a new type of polarization that has gripped the U.S. This phenomenon differs from the familiar divergence each party holds on policy issues related to the economy, foreign policy and the role of social safety nets. Instead it centers on members of one party holding a basic abhorrence for their opponents—an “othering” in which a group conceives of its rivals as wholly alien in every way. This toxic form of polarization has fundamentally altered political discourse, public civility and even the way politicians govern. It can be captured in Republicans’ admiration for Donald Trump’s ability to taunt and “dominate” liberals—distilled to the expression “own the libs.”

The *Science* paper addresses the rise of political sectarianism—the growing tendency of one political group to view its opponents as morally repugnant. This level of political divisiveness on both sides creates a feedback loop of hatred and leaves the U.S. open to manipulation by foreign powers that wish to further these internal rifts. On the horizon, however, are a few ideas about how to address these social and political divisions.

Scientific American delved into these issues with Eli J. Finkel, a psychology professor at Northwestern University and lead author of the new *Science* paper.

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