



# A Difference That Makes A Difference

## Does Ideological Polarization Depress Voter Turnout?

**T**here's a kind of truth in labeling when it comes to contemporary American politics. If you vote for a Democrat, you know what you're going to get in terms of that candidate's positions on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. If you support a Republican, you can bet he or she will take a more conservative stance on issues such as gun control and immigration.

In the mid-20th century, political scientists sometimes decried the lack of a "responsible party model," meaning parties that offered voters clear choices. With the parties now so well sorted ideologically—with few elected officials breaking with party orthodoxy on major issues—where does that leave voters?

There's a big academic debate about whether people who don't do politics for a living are as vehement about their disdain for the other party and its policies as the politicians are. One thing political scientists are arguing about is whether polarization—the differences and lack of cooperation between the parties—is turning off citizens to the extent that they're actually less likely to vote.

There's evidence both ways. One of the most polarized states is Wisconsin, which Republicans currently dominate at the state level but which votes Democratic for president. Wisconsin is home to some of the most Democratic precincts in the country, such as Dane County, home to Madison and the University of Wisconsin's flagship county, as well as some thoroughly Republican territory, including some suburbs of Milwaukee.

Some of those areas have voter turnout rates far above the national average. In 2012, Ozaukee County had the highest turnout of voting-age citizens—84 percent—of any county with a population above 50,000. Nearby Waukesha County was second, while Dane County came in fifth. Suburban Brookfield, which gave Republican candidate Romney two thirds of its vote in 2012, had an astonishing turnout rate of 90 percent.<sup>a</sup>

"Strongholds have higher turnout, apparently because people feel like they're more engaged in politics, their neighbors are engaged," said Torben Lutjen, a political scientist at the University of Dusseldorf who has studied polarized communities in Wisconsin.<sup>b</sup> Given a clear choice, voters in recent election cycles have seemed to prefer candidates who adhere to the party line, often punishing moderates or politicians with a reputation for compromising, particularly during party primaries. "The folks who've worked across party lines are generally being replaced," said Joe Hackney, a former Democratic speaker of the North Carolina House. "The public does ultimately hold the key to that."<sup>c</sup>

But voters often say they want politicians to do the right thing, to put party considerations aside and make the deals that are best for the state or the country. Voters never seem to like the negative advertising often aired not only by both campaigns but by outside groups such as super PACs (political action committees). Enough negativity—or simply the sense that candidates