

# On Twitter, Republican Senators are more polarizing than Democrats



While President Donald Trump has become well known for his use of Twitter to criticize Democrats and cajole Republicans, he is not the only politician to use that social media network to chastise their political opponents. In new research, [Annelise Russell](#) examines how US Senators use Twitter, finding that, even when they are in the majority, Senate Republicans are more likely than Democrats to use their tweets for partisan, political messages and to make negative attacks.

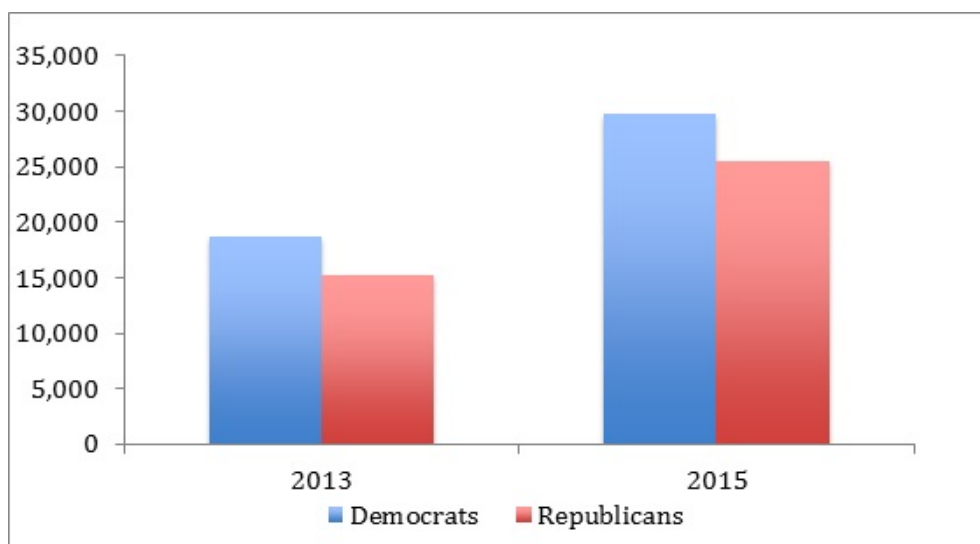
In American political institutions, party politics is sport. While running for office President Donald Trump declared “we’re going to win. We’re going to win so much... We’re going to win so much, you’re going to be so sick and tired of winning.” But not everyone is playing — or tweeting — the same partisan games.

Even the US Senate, once characterized by individual autonomy, is turning to Twitter for political bickering. Calls for compromise and bipartisan cooperation are increasingly drowned out by Senators who use Twitter to chastise their political opponents. And this was before President Trump’s daily tweet storm.

Twitter’s open platform may be ideal for partisan gamesmanship, but accessibility does not mean Senators’ communicate partisan messages equally. Senate Republicans are more likely than their Democratic counterparts to use their tweets for partisan, political messages. And they are especially more likely to go negative and attack their political opponents.

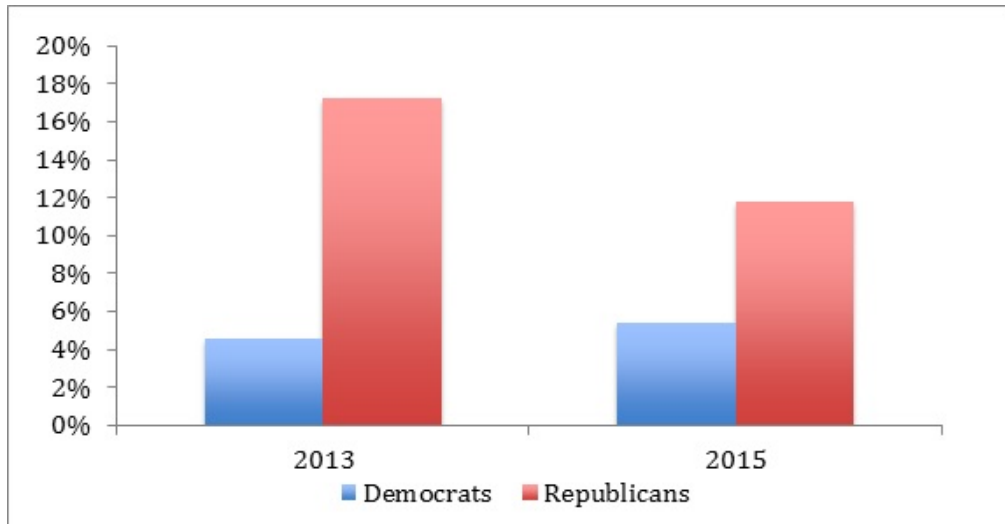
It’s not that Republicans are more likely to use Twitter than Democrats. In 2013, Democrats made more partisan and non-partisan tweets — arguably reflecting more members as the majority party — but the 2015 shift to a Republican Senate majority did not alter this pattern. Democrats, as the minority in 2015, were still more likely to turn to Twitter.

**Figure 1- Number of Tweets by US Senators**



But when you consider those tweets with partisan political rhetoric, differences become quite apparent, and it is clear that politics on Twitter widely varies by party affiliation. Democrats have a larger total share of Twitter activity, but when we look specifically at partisan messages the percentages are reversed.

**Figure 2 – Percent of Partisan Tweets by US Senators**



Republicans in 2013 more than tripled the partisan rhetoric of their Democratic counterparts, and though Republican partisan language dropped in 2015 and the majority party shifted, the Republicans sent almost twice as many tweets with partisan rhetoric. Republicans, when choosing partisan rhetoric, are about 12 percent more likely than Democrats to use partisan rhetoric on Twitter in 2013 and seven percent more likely in 2015. And not only are Republicans more likely to use partisan messages, that tone often takes a more negative tone.



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Senators' tweets were coded as negative if they are critical in their explicit mention of either a) the other party or b) representatives of the other party. Tweets in this category are both passive aggressive ("if only the Democratic President had acted sooner") and direct attacks ("Democrat's healthcare bill is a failure").

It boggles the mind to think that now, during an economic recession, Senate Dems put forth a plan to raise taxes... <http://t.co/j8P03xSV>

— Senator Rand Paul (@RandPaul) [July 25, 2012](#)

Instead of giving speeches about jobs, there is plenty Pres Obama can do to spur job growth now—start w/ repealing [#ObamaCare](#)

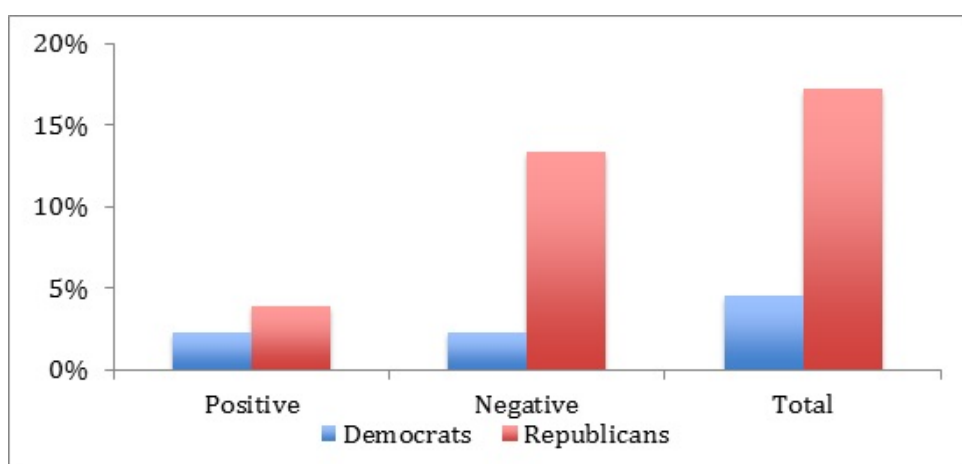
— Rob Portman (@senrobportman) [July 22, 2013](#)

The Republican shutdown caused us to lose at least 125,000 jobs. Totally unnecessary. What a shame. <http://t.co/jG9oQLzCCV>

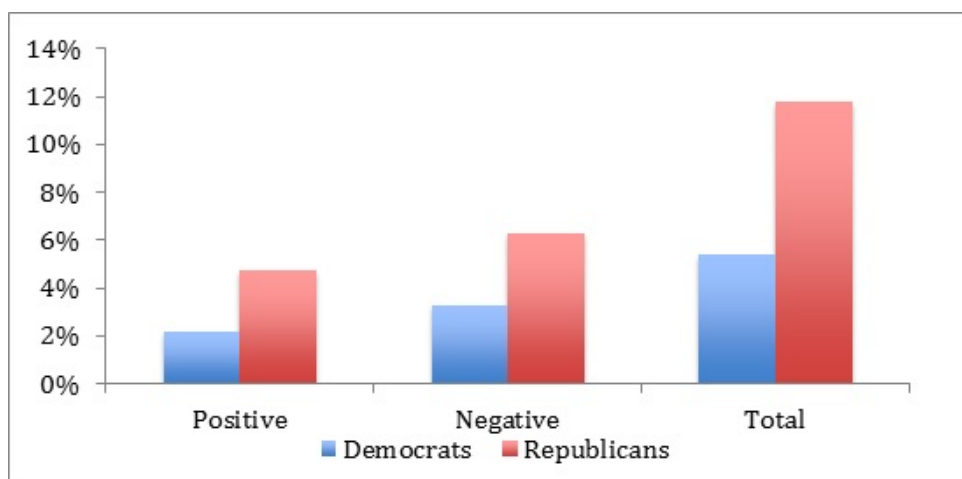
— Senator Harry Reid (@SenatorReid) [October 22, 2013](#)

In 2013, 17 percent of all Republican tweets included partisan rhetoric, and two-thirds of those partisan tweets included negative or attacking rhetoric. In 2013, Republicans were 12 percent more likely to chide the other party or attack Democrats, and in 2015 Republicans were about four percent more likely to use negative rhetoric than Democrats.

**Figure 3 – Percent of Partisan Tweets by Tone, 2013**



**Figure 4 – Percent of Partisan Tweets by Tone, 2015**



To a lesser extent, senators also signal positive, party loyalty in their tweets to show favoritism or support for one’s own party, such as promoting the party’s candidates in upcoming elections, promoting party-specific legislation or emphasizing positive party performance.

Good to see my fmr House colleague [@PaulRyanVP](#) as [@MittRomney #VP](#) pick. His budget experience is crucial for debt reduction and econ growth

— Jerry Moran (@JerryMoran) [August 11, 2012](#)

[@SenateDems](#) bill ensures that millionaires pay their fair share and ends loopholes that cut taxes for companies that move jobs overseas

— Senator Dick Durbin (@SenatorDurbin) [February 27, 2013](#)

RT [@SenMikeLee](#) "Senator Ted Cruz has created his official Twitter account [@SenTedCruz](#). You should follow him. Please RT" [#pjnet](#)

— John Gunter Jr. (@johntheutahn) [January 2, 2014](#)

Republicans were still more likely to send partisan messages with positive tone, but the disparity between the two parties is less stark. Republicans were only two percent more likely to send messages with positive partisan tone in 2013 and about three percent in 2015.

Overall, Republican Party members in the Senate appear more likely to engage in party polarizing language — even when they are the majority party in both chambers of Congress.

One explanation for why we see these asymmetric partisan patterns on Twitter rhetoric may be the relationship between the President and Congress. As the Democratic Party's central figure, before 2017, President Obama was a target for Republican critics whose interests are served by unfavorable perceptions of the president. For instance, Republican senators represented in the dataset often attacked the president and Democratic Party on Twitter for the "#ObamaEconomy" or "Obamacare," but Democrats lacked a similar central figure to blame — then House Speaker John Boehner took enough grief from his own party — so they were not as readily primed to go negative.

Senators' Twitter activity is being reinforced as a common routine in Congress, and partisan politics is clearly one of the many motivations and goals that members have when turning to social media. And the partisan influence may carry over not only to the political rhetoric they use but how they communicate about constituent issues or how they frame public policy problems.

- *This article is based on the paper, '[US Senators on Twitter: Asymmetric Party Rhetoric in 140 Characters](#)', in *American Politics Research*.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author



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Annelise Russell is a PhD Candidate in Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests include public policy within US institutions, specifically Congress and the media, with an emphasis on how new media platforms serve elite interests.