

# Political polarization means more Americans are voting against rather than for candidates in presidential elections



*Traditionally in elections people vote for candidates that they like. But in recent years, surveys have show a growing number of people cast their votes against candidates rather than for them – as many as one third in the 2020 election. In new research, [Diego Garzia](#) and [Frederico Ferreira da Silva](#) find that those who have a less positive feeling about the political party they usually identify with are more likely to vote against a presidential candidate compared to those who feel more strongly partisan.*

When we consider how people decide about who they should vote for, we tend to think about their choices as the expression of support for a given party or candidate. Yet, many citizens interpret their vote choice as being mostly “against” rather than “for” a party or candidate. Following the 2020 US Presidential election, about one third of respondents from our survey of the American voting population stated that they voted *against* a presidential candidate. This behavior, known as negative voting, has been studied intermittently since the 1960s. These studies have seen negative voting as a reaction to incumbent performance, making it a special case of retrospective voting in elections involving incumbents, or as a rationalization to reduce people’s discomfort when they have conflicts between the political party they support and their beliefs or ideologies.

Our [new work](#) proposes a novel take on this phenomenon, and considers that negative voting in recent elections is a product of the increasing dislike people have for those from the ‘other’ political party (while feeling positive about their own party, known as affective polarization). Numerous studies have documented the [growth of this affective polarization in the American electorate](#). The [literature on negative partisanship](#) has begun examining the potential electoral implications of when people feel hostile to those who support the “other” party. Anchored on extensive research on social psychology which demonstrates that negative attitudes and identities can develop independently from positive ones, [these studies](#) have shown that there is a relationship between negative out-group identities, and political attitudes and voting behavior, even when controlling for positive identifications. [Other studies](#) have shown that negative attitudes can link not only to political parties but can also target political candidates. Drawing on these findings, our work examines whether negative voting can be understood as what happens in elections when people become highly hostile to out-group parties and candidates in the context of a highly polarized American electorate.

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*Diego Garzia and Frederico Ferreira da Silva find that political polarization means more Americans are voting against rather than for candidates in presidential elections.*

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog)



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## Why voters vote against candidates

Our findings show that, while negative voting rates in the latest election are not higher than reports from previous studies, the factors explaining this type of voting behavior may have changed considerably. The most important variable accounting for negative voting in the 2020 US presidential election is the extent to which more negative attitudes toward opponent candidates prevail over positive attitudes of in-party candidates. The more this is the case, the more likely individuals are to cast a vote *against*. The likelihood of negative voting is higher whenever hate for an out-candidate outweighs love for an in-candidate, while party-based considerations appear less related.

However, the role of negative attitudes in shaping negative voting patterns can only be fully understood once we consider positive attitudes. Perhaps counterintuitively, negative voters are not predominantly strong partisans, but rather independents/leaners. About one in two leaners/independents in our sample cast a vote against, while only 15 percent of strong partisans did so. Positive voters, then, have a strong attachment to the party they support, which translates into higher levels of in-group affect compared to negative voters. Hence, while negative voters do not report, on average, stronger levels of out-group dislike compared to positive voters, they are much less likely to feel strong affection for their own in-group. By prompting higher levels of in-group love to counterbalance out-group hate, strong partisanship appears to shield individuals from negative voting.

## Independents are more likely to vote against

On these bases, the consequences of polarization and growing negativity in American society and politics do not fall exclusively upon partisans. Independents are similarly vulnerable to negativity, yet with the aggravation of this not being counterbalanced by affection for an in-group – a factor which we have shown to be an important determinant in reducing negative voting.

Our findings also confirm the intuitions provided by previous studies that negative voting is disproportionately concentrated on incumbent parties and candidates. While 18 percent of Trump supporters in our sample cast a vote against, nearly 40 percent of Biden supporters declared they cast a vote against Trump.

The fact that, even in the extremely polarized context of the 2020 presidential election, 70 percent of voters from our sample are *not* negative voters is at least somewhat reassuring. However, we have not been able to quantify how many citizens decide to abstain from voting because of their negative views of parties and their candidates. We can think of negative voting as a behavioral option to voice discontent with what voters might consider to be a [poor choice of candidates](#), but if even more citizens instead resort to an exit strategy and decide not to vote for these reasons, we may have uncovered but the tip of the iceberg.

- This article is based on the paper, '[The Electoral Consequences of Affective Polarization? Negative Voting in the 2020 US Presidential Election](#)', 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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