



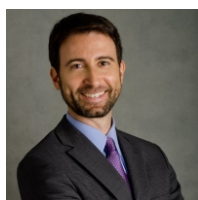
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Speaking of Psychology: Why America's bitter politics are like a bad marriage, with Eli Finkel, PhD

Episode 122 — Why America's bitter politics are like a bad marriage

These days, Republicans and Democrats don't just disagree with each other's political opinions—many view members of the other party as immoral and even abhorrent. Eli Finkel, PhD, a social psychologist at Northwestern University in Chicago, led a group of social scientists who published a paper in the journal *Science* about the causes and consequences of this deepening rift. Finkel studies American politics, romantic relationships, and the intersection of those two concepts. He joins us to discuss the rise of political sectarianism and why the current state of American politics is like a bad marriage.

About the expert: Eli Finkel, PhD



Eli Finkel is a professor in the psychology department and in the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. He studies romantic relationships (e.g., initial attraction, marital dynamics, shared goal pursuit), American politics (e.g., political polarization), and their intersection. He is the author of the book "The All-Or-Nothing Marriage: How the Best Marriages Work."

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SPEAKING OF PSYCHOLOGY

Why America's bitter politics are like a bad marriage. With

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Transcript

Kim Mills: The 2020 U.S. elections were some of the most divisive and vitriolic in modern history, leaving many Americans exhausted and dispirited. And if you're thinking our country seems more polarized than ever, you're not alone. In a recent paper published in the journal *Science*, a group of psychologists, political scientists, and other social scientists found that the level of contempt between Americans who identify as Republicans and those who identify as Democrats has been increasing over the past 30 years. These days, many Americans don't just disagree with their political opponents. They see them as immoral and even abhorrent. Some have termed the climate in our nation as a civil cold war.

What are the causes of this deepening rift? Is there any way to reverse it? And is it dangerous to the future of our democracy? These are some of the questions that we'll answer today on *Speaking of Psychology*, the flagship podcast of the American Psychological Association, that examines the links between psychological science and everyday life. I'm Kim Mills.

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My guest today is Dr. Eli Finkel, a professor of social psychology at Northwestern University in Chicago, who co-led the group of 15 researchers who wrote the recent paper in *Science*. He studies romantic relationships, American politics, and the intersection of those two topics. And he's here today to talk about his research. Welcome to Speaking of Psychology, Dr. Finkel.

Eli Finkel, PhD: I'm delighted to be here.

Mills: The title of the paper that I mentioned is Political Sectarianism in America. And in it, you and your colleagues write about how political sectarianism today is like religious sectarianism in the past. Why did you choose the term sectarianism to describe what you're seeing in American politics today?

Finkel: I'm glad you asked that question. There were basically two reasons. The first is to distinguish between two different types of polarization. One is a polarization based on ideas, that is Democrats and Republicans differing in their political ideals or their policy preferences. And the second is a more interpersonal social, psychological type of polarization, which is increasing distance and animus toward people on the other side. So that was one of the reasons why we wanted to make the distinction, is we're talking about the second type of polarization, this social, psychological thing, rather than these political ideals.

But sometimes talk about that second type of polarization using the word tribalism. And we had planned to use that term for a while and we shifted away from it at the end, here again for two reasons. One is that it's become increasingly clear that using the word tribalism in a generally derogatory way is at best a sensitive issue vis-a-vis indigenous Americans. More and more people have been voicing that concern. And the second thing is that the word tribalism, at least to me, polls for metaphors around kinship, around family, and really what we're seeing is something closer to a holy war between the left and the right these days. So in that sense, we wanted something that had more religious connotations.

Mills: So why has sectarianism in the U.S. increased in recent years? What's behind the rift?

Finkel: So we talk about a few different reasons in the paper. One of them is that political orientation has increasingly come to function as a mega identity. It used to be that you had plenty of liberals in the conservative party and plenty of conservatives in the Democratic party. It used to be that people's social demographic categories were not determinative of which party they were in. But increasingly these days, if I tell you that somebody is a white evangelical, you have a pretty strong clue about what party that person is in. And that goes for race and gender and all sorts of other issues like that, or other demographic and social categories.

So part of the issue is that Democrats, the Democratic party used to be a broad, inclusive group. And the Republican party used to be a broad, inclusive group. And they had tons of internal conflict with other members of their own political party. And increasingly, the two groups have grown more and more different from each other, and so this idea of sorting or the emergence of party as a mega identity is one of the major reasons why we've become so much more sectarian in recent decades.

Mills: So I was reading the paper. I was thinking about how to date this, or what might be some of the underlying causes of how we've gotten to this point. And I started thinking about the end of the fairness doctrine in 1987, which for listeners who may not remember this, it was a regulation that required the TV networks offered equal time to opposing views. Was that a factor, or would you look at, say, the rise of Newt Gingrich in Congress, or the election of Ronald Reagan? Or do we go all the way back to the sixties?

Finkel: Well, to some degree we're still fighting the battles of the sixties, but you can't really date this surging sectarianism to the sixties, in large part because it was really after the sixties that you saw the party realignment. So it used to be that relatively conservative southerners were in the Democratic party. And it really wasn't until after the sixties that you saw this wholesale shift of conservative southerners to the Republican party. But yes, you're exactly right about things like the fairness doctrine and Newt Gingrich.

So the fairness doctrine was a post-World War II law that required that anybody using the broadcast air had to discuss politically sensitive topics, or at least when they discussed those topics, they had to do it in a way that was fair to Democrats and Republicans alike. And in 1987, really with support of the Reagan administration, they basically killed the fairness doctrine, and in 1988 Rush Limbaugh went into syndication. And it's not a surprise that that was the moment when the sorts of media that Rush Limbaugh really ushered in went national, went viral, if you will. And soon after that, it was 1996 that Fox News launched, MSNBC was casting around for a long time, trying to find a format that worked. In 2006, they figured out that basically being the liberal version of Fox News, if you will, the liberal counterpoint to Fox News, was the way to do it. And there's no law on the books. There's no real norm anymore, at least not like there used to be, in order to have fair coverage. So yeah, in terms of the media, there's a huge profit motive to tell people exactly what they want to hear. Anger and righteous indignation and moral fury, those things sell.

And it's not just that we've seen the media changes. The politicians themselves have realized the power of this. And in that sense, there's nobody who's done a better job or a more corrosive job than Newt Gingrich.

Mills: But we're not blaming the media, per se. I mean, they were tapping into something that was nascent, is that what you're saying? I mean, I hate to blame the media. Everyone blames the media.

Finkel: Well no, because there's no way the media could be at fault. Look, these things are cyclical and recursive and multiply determined, but yes, I'm also blaming the media. Really at the end of the day, I blame us. I blame the citizenry. I blame the body politic. I mean, it's sort of up to us how much we want to double down on our rageful fury and listen to one side of the political discourse instead of the other side. But do I think that the media play a crucial role in this? I absolutely do.

Let's take the example of wearing masks for COVID. I mean, Fox News deserves a whole lot of blame for this. Obviously Donald Trump does too, but it wasn't the case in other countries, that half of the electorate viewed this piece of cloth over your face as tyranny, as some sort of major violation of your freedom and independence. And that

was a story that was heavily built by the right wing media ecosystem, in conjunction with the right wing political class, especially Donald Trump himself.

Mills: I think there's a certain irony around that, because in a sense the COVID 19 pandemic should be a uniting force, right? I mean, we're using the slogan, we're all in this together. And yet, we're not.

Finkel: This is something that keeps me up at night. We've had the sectarianism for a while. It's as bad as it's ever been, but it's been getting worse for a long time. And I think sometimes, what would it take for us to get a little better about this? And I don't mean now, I just want to be clear about this, what would it take for us to be centrists or compromise on policy? I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about be less rageful and hateful toward each other and be able at least to hear each other, regardless of whether we actually agree. So what would it take to get us to a place like that? And social psychologists have talked for many, many decades about the possibility that a big external threat could do the job.

And I become alarmed about what I think is our nation's inability to do that. And COVID is one, but there was one that came earlier, which is 9/11. 9/11 brought us together for something on the order of 48 seconds. And everybody loved George Bush for those 48 seconds. And then how long was it before we hated each other even more? Now you're going to say, well, that's because of the Iraq war and so forth, but it's in large part because of how divided we are.

So now let's enter COVID-19. And the Pew Research Center conducted a major survey, representative samples from 14 different nations, asking them that agree to which, on a scale from zero to 100, the coronavirus brought the society closer together versus pushed them further apart, and relative to the other 13 nations, America is a huge outlier in terms of Americans' belief across the political divide that we are much more divided than we were before. So it wasn't inevitable. The other countries didn't have this problem. We are almost two standard deviations above the mean on that it drove us apart measure than the second highest country, which is Spain, and about three standard deviations above the mean relative. I'm sorry, yeah, about three standard deviations higher than the overall mean across the 13 other nations.

So yes, in principle, external threat can bring us apart. In practice, maybe the Chinese army has to make it all the way to Omaha and then we'll finally pull together. Because the threats that we've seen, 9/11 and COVID, they don't seem to be anywhere close to big enough.

Mills: Are Democrats and Republicans equally polarized? Your paper gauges how different groups regard each other on a feeling thermometer. So are there temperature differences between Democrats and Republicans?

Finkel: Generally, no. So the feeling thermometer, as some of your listeners may know, is a scale from zero to 100, where zero is cold and 100 is warm, and you can evaluate, you know, if you're a Democrat, how do you feel about your fellow Democrats and how do you feel about Republicans? And one of the things that we highlight in the paper is that feelings toward your fellow Democrats or fellow Republicans, your in group, basically haven't changed over the last several decades. They're in the 70 to 75 range, warm, pretty warm, not extremely warm. What's really changed and is driving what we think of as polarization or sectarianism is the dislike for the out group.

So if you go back to the seventies, your feeling toward the opposing party was something like a 50 on a scale from zero to 100. And now it's going down to about 20, which is something between, we went from tepid to basically frosty on this temperature gauge. In terms of whether one side has stronger dislike than the other does, pretty much no. They basically, if you plot these temporal trends over time, and even if you just look at the scores these days, it's pretty similar in terms of how much they like their in group, how much they dislike the other group.

I will say, and this is, I think, an important distinction, is that we're talking about the general public, the mass public here. So Americans, residents and citizens, but the political elites, especially political politicians, they really have polarized when it comes to ideas. And for that classification, like when we're thinking of politicians in particular, the Republicans have gone further to the right than the Democrats have gone to the left.

Mills: Why is this type of sectarianism so dangerous? How is it a threat to democracy?

Finkel: Well, let me ask you, if you believe that the people on the other side, they don't just have the wrong political ideas, but they're dangerous for America and Americans, or if you believe that, again, it's not really that we just disagree, it's that the other side is quote downright evil. And these are the exact measures that political scientists are using to assess this stuff. And even on the downright evil question, 42% of Democrats and 42% Republicans believe that the members of the other party are literally downright evil. Would you be willing to sacrifice a little bit of democracy to make sure that you keep the other side out of office? Would you be willing to vote for somebody that clearly was not behaving in ways that you thought were acceptable? Clearly tried to suppress the vote, maybe of some Black people, maybe of some of the other people that happen to be in your unpreferred social demographics? The answer is more and more of us are willing to do those things.

Would you even support potential violence in support of your political goals? Well, I don't really understand why you wouldn't, right? This is in a sense a moral trade off, and each individual case that you get, like would I support a little bit of a violence to make sure that Donald Trump can't keep kids in cages, or if you're Republican, to make sure that Democrats can't keep murdering unborn children? You see why people would say, look, a little bit of violence to prevent that, or a little bit of sacrificing of democratic principle, those are trade offs I'm willing to take.

The problem, as I'm sure you can figure out, is okay, so that's one case or two case, but over hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of people making those decisions, you end up having really damaged democracy. And I guess I would love to have your listeners ask themselves, in a world where you've really damaged democracy because you fought so hard for the political ends rather than the democratic means, you've ended up with a world where it's really about power. It's really about power and domination. And whom has that ever served other than the people who have power, to impose that power over the people who don't have power?

Mills: That sounds pretty dire. A couple of months ago, we had another psychologist on the podcast, Tania Israel, who was talking about a book that she recently published that talks about how to have productive conversations with people you disagree with politically. Do you think that encouraging these kinds of personal conversations and connections can make a difference on a larger scale?

Finkel: Well, it's that last part where the rubber meets the road. So if what you're asking me is do I think that having meaningful conversations with people on the other side can reduce the sectarianism? Yeah. I definitely do. Get people face to face. Ideally push them to try to understand each other, even if they don't agree. Don't necessarily, don't push them towards centrism, just toward comprehensibility without demonization. I think that can work.

But you're talking about at scale, that is there's hundreds of millions of American voters or of voting age, anyway. Do I think there's something that we can implement that is scalable to get people outside of their sectarian mindsets, their vilification of the opposing party? I haven't seen it yet. I'm not giving up, but I think we are on a bad road. And unless we are willing to challenge not only the evildoers on the other side, but also the very, very righteous people on our side, to make sure that they're not overstating the case and so forth, I don't see how we can bridge this on a mass scale. At least, I don't see how we can do that yet.

Mills: What about social media as an opportunity? I mean, that is on a mass scale already, and I know a lot of people on the right are fleeing some of the standard social media channels now to go over to places like Parlor. But what if there were something sort of, you know, the holy good social media channel with some other name that we haven't invented yet?

Finkel: Again, I think that the cavalry is not coming. I think that the solutions are going to rest with us. And the reason why is there's nothing about Twitter or Facebook that drives us apart. It's about human psychology, in conjunction with, again, the profit motive, right? So Facebook and Twitter make money when people engage with content more. But isn't that kind of misdirecting some of the blame? I mean, why is it that Facebook and Twitter tend to stoke up our rage so much? Well, because they know from their algorithm, that that's the sort of content that people really engage deeply with. For whatever reason, we tend to find it very, very satisfying to focus on how terrible the other side is.

Billy Brady and his colleagues published a terrific paper a few years back. This is in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, where they looked at the likelihood of content being retweeted, and they found that it was really moralized, emotional

content that significantly increased the likelihood of retweeting. And particularly within, rather than between echo chambers. So liberals are tweeting to liberals and conservatives to conservatives, but what does it mean to say moralized and emotional? It's not just moralized language, like responsibility and duty, and it's not just emotional language, like sad, it's moralized emotional language, like evil, like shame. These are the things that we love to retweet. So you ask me, do I think that we could build a social media ecosystem that plays to the better angels of our nature? I think in principle we can, but probably only among the people who are especially oriented toward trying to be less demonizing of the other side, which unfortunately is not most of us.

Mills: It reminds me of the early days of the internet, when it was so altruistic and it was supposed to be to bring people together, and we would never sell anything on the internet. There should be no advertising. And it's morphed into something that's totally unrecognizable now, from what DARPA had created.

Finkel: Yes. I just want to underscore, again, it's easy to blame the internet, and I do. I do blame Twitter. I do blame Facebook. But let's be clear that their blame isn't the source. It isn't the root of this problem. The root of this problem is something in human psychology, and it is about intergroup psychology, inter political party psychology, where we just engage incredibly deeply with this sort of vilification content. I mean, whom would you want to retweet? Would you want to retreat the person who says, "I'm pro choice. I think that should be the right of every woman, but look, it's a complex issue and I'd love to hear everyone's thoughts," or the person who says, "I'm pro choice. It's the right of a woman. Say what you want. I won't change my mind." And I think, look, the data suggests that it's the latter one. And that one wasn't even an enraged, vilifying tweet. It was just a morally certain, definitive sort of tweet. And social media love that. Why do social media love that? Because humans love that.

Mills: That's what appeals to us. It pushes our deep, deep buttons. Yeah. So that brings me to where you normally work. Well, normally, I mean where you work a lot of the time. You study romantic relationships. Marriage is an area of expertise for you. And I'm wondering how you got from studying marriage to being involved in this particular paper.

Finkel: Well, yeah, I mean, I have a very, very clear origin story for this. And people used to ask me, how did you get interested in studying romantic attraction or marriage? And I was like, well, isn't everybody interested in that? And it was nebulous. But this one I can tell you exactly what happened. It was two years ago, and I was watching the Christine Blasey Ford, Brett Kavanaugh hearings in the Senate. And she spoke in the morning and had what I perceived to be extremely compelling, devastating testimony. He came out in the afternoon and fulminated, and basically blew our hair back while watching through the television screen.

And it was just clear, even by the end of that day, when I was paying attention on Twitter, I was paying attention on the various cable news networks, it was just clear that if you thought he was a rapist, frat boy in advance, you thought he was a rapist frat boy after. And if you thought this was a vast diabolical, Democratic conspiracy to destroy this man's reputation, then you thought that before, you now think that after, as well. And I just became concerned, like what is the future of a country like this, that can go through this much additional content, this much additional information, and change, so far as I can tell, nobody's mind in the entire country? Maybe there's like, I don't know, Ethel from Fresno maybe changed her mind, but basically nobody's mind changes.

And then I really worried, like, what is the future? What's the end game here? There's nobody who can speak across the divide. There's no Walter Cronkite. How do we start hating each other less? And I couldn't figure it out. And I thought, I mean, this insight basically commandeered my intellectual life. I was struggling to think about anything else. And I thought it was a bummer that I don't have any knowledge about that. And then I realized, wait a minute, maybe the 20 plus years of my life that I've devoted to understanding what makes for an effective or a successful versus an unsuccessful marriage or family life.

And I realized that if we were to take the major insights from, I don't know, 75 years of relationship science and say, well, what is it that creates a good marriage, and flip the question to the rather diabolical one of what would the most toxic possible marriage look like? And it's easy to say it. You would be as contemptuous of each other as possible, and any time you had an opportunity to interpret what your partner did, you'd make sure that you interpreted his behavior in the nastiest way that you could, and you

would surround yourself by people that think he is beneath contempt and can't figure out why you were ever with him.

And so we can go through and sort of distill or extract from the relationships field real lessons about what good relationships look like and what bad relationships look like. And if we take those characteristics of the worst possible marriage we could design and we superimpose them on our body politic, we've built it. We have built the most toxic marriage I can imagine. And also, last thing on this, the relationship space has some knowledge of how to improve toxic marriages. There is something called marital therapy. A lot of people go when they absolutely hate each other, and some percentage of those actually get better. And so that is what really pivoted me into this space in general.

Mills: So maybe we can close on a more positive note and talk about possible solutions. I know that your paper had a few ideas. Can you talk about what we might be able to do to dial back this animosity?

Finkel: Well, some structural fixes could help, almost certainly. So we've got these very, very gerrymandered House of Representative districts, where the idea that you would lose an election to the person on the other side is impossible. So the only threat really is that you would be beaten in the primary by somebody even more extreme than you are. We could fix those sorts of things. I know that a lot of people, especially on the left right now, are very disturbed by the electoral college, and generally the small state bias where a vote in Wyoming is worth 60 times as much for the Senate as a vote in California, and those sorts of issues.

My concern is that the polarization, the sectarianism itself, is going to make solutions to those problems impossible, because the solutions to those problems will benefit one party or the other, and we aren't in a moment when our leaders are willing to take one for the team for the betterment of democracy. So I keep coming back to this thing that I think is not a satisfying solution, but it is one that we talk about in our paper, as well, is trying to inculcate a deeper sense of humility, a deeper sense of recognizing that we all have our life experiences and those life experiences tilt us to have certain sorts of moral understandings of how things function.

And yet, they're not universally true, and other people have different life experiences. And once we have a deep understanding of those things, I believe we can become more tolerant. What mechanism is going to get us to the place where we deeply understand people on the other side and therefore continue to disagree with them, of course, but vilify them less, I'm not exactly sure.

Mills: Well, thank you for joining me today, Dr. Finkel. It's been really interesting. Thank you.

Finkel: Yeah, I'm glad I could end on a positive note.

Mills: You can find previous episodes of Speaking of Psychology on our website, at [www.speakingofpsychology.org/\(/research/action/speaking-of-psychology\)](http://www.speakingofpsychology.org/(/research/action/speaking-of-psychology)) or wherever you get your podcasts. If you have comments or ideas for future podcasts, email us at speakingofpsychology@apa.org (<mailto:speakingofpsychology@apa.org>). Speaking of Psychology is produced by Lea Winerman. Our sound editor is Chris Condayan. Thank you for listening. For the American Psychological Association, I'm Kim Mills.

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