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The Upshot
THE 2016 RACE

American Anger: It's Not the Economy. It's the Other Party.

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Americans are angry. That's the sentiment that many believe is driving the 2016 election. They are angry because the rich are getting richer, the average guy is struggling and the government in Washington hasn't done anything to stop the trend.

But it may not be that simple.

Data on the nation's economic recovery, people's reactions to current economic conditions and their overall sense of satisfaction with life doesn't suggest Americans are angry. In fact, historical measures indicate people are about as happy and satisfied with the economy and with their lives as they were in 1983 when Ronald Reagan told us it was "morning again in America."

If that's the case, why does it feel more like a 1 a.m. bar brawl?

The answer may have more to do with political parties than economics, or at least with the interaction of the two. Today's voters have sorted themselves and polarized into partisan groups that look very different than they did in the late 1980s. To make matters worse, members of each side like the other side less than they did before. Americans aren't annoyed only by the economy;

they're also annoyed with each other.

Objective economic conditions measured by the Federal Reserve suggest that the nation's recovery from the Great Recession began in 2010, when gross domestic product began to expand, unemployment began to fall and real disposable income began to increase. By 2015, the misery index — a combined measure of unemployment and inflation — was about as low as it had been since the 1950s, which means there was an active demand for goods and services along with low unemployment and inflation.

Most Americans seemed to appreciate this growth. Data on the Index of Consumer Sentiment, one of the longest-running measures of Americans' views of the economy, show that by the end of 2015, consumer sentiment was as positive as it had been in the mid-2000s and mid-1980s. It was nearly identical to where it was at the end of 1983, when Mr. Reagan's re-election romp — based almost entirely on the victory over stagflation — began to take shape.

Even breaking the consumer sentiment data down by income levels does little to buoy the argument that Americans were pessimistic. From 2009-2015, the average gap in economic satisfaction between the upper and lower thirds of the income distribution was 13.7 points, much lower than it was during the Reagan years (21.3) and lower than the gap during the administrations of George H.W. Bush (14.7), Bill Clinton (16.7) and George W. Bush (18.4).

As we entered 2016, Americans — of all income levels — felt positively about the economy even though by some indicators many people had not recovered their losses. The employment-population ratio and median household income, for example, had only begun to recover in 2015.

To get a sense of whether these economic factors were affecting the general mood of the nation in a way not captured by consumer sentiment, I examined one of the longest-standing measures of general happiness. Since 1972, the General Social Survey has asked people to "take things all together" and rate

their level of happiness. The 40-year trend shows only modest changes — and may actually suggest a small increase in happiness in recent years.

Describing Americans' mood as distinctively angry in 2015 elides this evidence. Americans were optimistic about the nation's economy and generally happy — in fact, no less optimistic or happy than they had been historically.

But there was an increasing sense in the fall and winter of 2015 that many Americans were filled with contempt. Using analytic tools provided by Crimson Hexagon, I calculated the average monthly increase in the share of news articles about the 2016 election that contained the word "angry." Between November 2015 and March 2016, the share of stories about angry voters increased by 200 percent. Where was the sense of gloom coming from?

Some evidence suggests that the ire was derived directly from politics. When asked by various pollsters about trusting the government, the direction of the country, American progress or the president, Americans were gloomy — gloomier than their economic assessments might have predicted. When broken out by party, these pessimistic views reveal a growing partisan divide, one that has been distilling around racial attitudes for nearly two decades.

The increasing alignment between party and racial attitudes goes back to the early 1990s. The Pew Values Survey asks people whether they agree that "we should make every effort to improve the position of minorities, even if it means giving them preferential treatment."

Over time, Americans' party identification has become more closely aligned with answers to this question and others like it. Pew reports that, "since 1987, the gap on this question between the two parties has doubled — from 18 points to 40 points." Democrats are now much more supportive (52 percent) of efforts to improve racial equality than they were a few decades ago, while the views of Republicans have been largely unchanged (12 percent agree).

That Democrats and Republicans have different views on issues — even issues about race and rights — is not surprising. But recent work by Stanford University's Shanto Iyengar and his co-authors shows something else has been brewing in the electorate: a growing hostility toward members of the opposite party. This enmity, they argue, percolates into opinions about everyday life.

Partisans, for example, are now more concerned that their son or daughter might marry someone of the opposite party (compared with Britain today and the United States in 1960). They also found that partisans are surprisingly willing to discriminate against people who are not members of their political party.

We've entered an age of party-ism.

Writing in The Washington Post, Michael Tesler, a University of California, Irvine, political scientist, explained that because the growing partisan divide is partly fueled by racial attitudes, partisans (in Washington and in the electorate) also take increasingly opposite positions on many racially inflected controversies.

Some are squarely political like police misconduct. But others spill over into areas like sports, music and movies, which we often think of as more social than political. Disagreements between people about nominations for the Academy Awards, for example, may now become emotional as well as political if they involve racial attitudes because of the sorting of these attitudes by party and the contempt people feel for the other side.

Democrats and Republicans like each other a lot less now than they did 60 years ago in part because they have sorted into parties based on attitudes on race, religion and ethnicity. These attitudes and emotions have been activated in the lead-up to the 2016 election, sometimes by terrorist violence and other times by candidate language itself. Add to this mix the fact that the country is becoming less white and that nonwhites are disproportionately more likely to be Democrats, and an explanation for the anger that filled the

air in 2015 emerges.

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