

Groucho Marx Explains American Politics

We've all seen the acceleration of polarized politics in the last few years. Nowadays we can't even agree on the [supposedly apolitical branch](#) of the federal government.

Over at the Pew Research Center, interest in this political polarization has turned into something of an obsession. Some of the highlights from their 2019 coverage include:

- 60 percent of Republicans [trust government officials](#) appointed by the president, compared to just 28 percent of Democrats
- 73 percent of Democrats say "[scientists should take an active role in policy](#) debates," compared to 43 percent of Republicans
- 71 percent of Republicans believe "[churches and other religious organizations](#) do more good than harm in American society," compared with just 44 percent of Democrats
- 67 percent of Democrats believe "[colleges and universities are having a positive effect](#) on the way things are going in the country," compared to just 33 percent of Republicans

That last bullet point brings to mind the famous words of Professor Quincy Adams Wagstaff, played by Groucho Marx in the film *Horse Feathers*.

Wagstaff, the new president of Huxley College, is informed that the board of trustees have some suggestions they would like to submit, to which Marx's character responds, "I think you know what the trustees can do with their suggestions."

I don't know what they have to say it makes no difference anyway whatever it is, I'm against it! No matter what it is

or who commenced it, I'm against it. Your proposition may be good but let's have one thing understood whatever it is, I'm against it! And even when you've changed it or condensed it, I'm against it! I'm opposed to it, on general principles I'm opposed to it.

While obviously exaggerated for comedic affect, Professor Wagstaff's attitude now seems to be coming dangerously close to reality, if we haven't already reached that point.

How did this happen to our country's politics? When did it become a game of beating your opponent, rather than bettering the country?

In a [2016 article](#) on demographic trends in American politics, Pew Research put the problem as such:

These days Democrats and Republicans no longer stop at disagreeing with each other's ideas. Many in each party now deny the other's facts, disapprove of each other's lifestyles, avoid each other's neighborhoods, impugn each other's motives, doubt each other's patriotism, can't stomach each other's news sources, and bring different value systems to such core social institutions as religion, marriage and parenthood. It's as if they belong not to rival parties but alien tribes.

Part of this might be due to the [partisan sorting](#) of conservatives into the Republican party, and liberals into the Democratic Party. If so, perhaps we need to stop being against something just because our opponents are for it, or stop being for something just because our own tribe is also for it.

Mightn't it be time for us to seek more common ground, instead of continuing our scorched earth tactics?

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