

Head of Communications:

Linda Schädler

Telephone number: 0621 181- 1434

schaedler@uni-mannheim.de

www.uni-mannheim.de

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Press Release

Political Polarization Leads to Destructive Behavior

In highly polarized societies, voters show particularly spiteful behavior towards supporters of the opposing party. The Mannheim economist Wladislaw Mill and his colleague John Morgan have provided the first experimental evidence of this behavior in their study on the society in the United States of America.

In their study, which was published in *Experimental Economics*, the two authors analyzed if and to which extent political polarization influences non-political behavior – in particular when it comes to finances. The data were collected before and after the presidential election in 2016, in which Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton.

The result of the study shows that the willingness to reduce the wealth of another person increases by 15 percent if the other person is voting for the opposing party. The participants were asked whether they are willing to accept a smaller amount of money in exchange for financial losses for the representative of the opposing party.

“Our study shows that people in a highly polarized society are acting more aggressively and may also be less willing to cooperate. This means that polarization can lead to financial disadvantages”, says Mill, the author of the study. As a researcher in behavioral economics, Mill is also interested in the “dark side” of human nature. He concludes that it is particularly important to act on polarization and to pull all strings to unite a fragmented society.

The study also shows that Clinton voters in general had a stronger aversion to Trump supporters than vice versa: The willingness of democrats to reduce the payout of another person was increased by 34 percent if the other person voted for Trump. Obviously, Clinton supporters behaved more spitefully towards Republicans. “We were very surprised by this finding”, says Mill. For Trump voters, the party affiliation had no statistically significant effect on their decision.

A possible explanation could have been that Clinton lost the election. But the fact that the study revealed similar findings at five different points in time (before the election, after the election and after the election midterms two years later) proves that this is a general phenomenon.

The authors' main reason for choosing the US is that the bipartisan political system is particularly suitable for such a study. The results of the study, however, can be transferred to other countries with a similar structure, says Mill.

Link to the [original publication](#)

Contact:

Prof. Dr. Wladislaw Mill
Junior professor of Behavioral Economics
University of Mannheim
Phone: +49 621 181-1897
E-mail: mill@uni-mannheim.de

Yvonne Kaul
Research communication
University of Mannheim
Phone: +49 621 181-1266
E-mail: kaul@uni-mannheim.de