

## Opinion Why the United States needs to stop being a nation of losers



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The everyone-gets-a-trophy era is over. In America today, everyone's a loser.

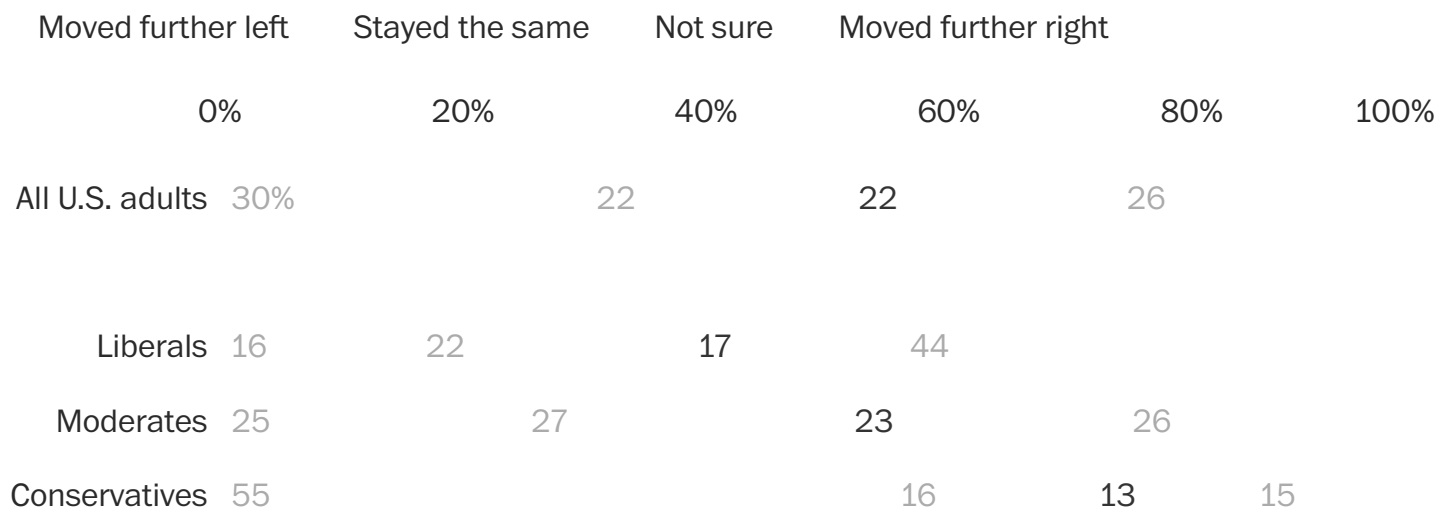
We see ourselves as losers, at least. That's according to recent polls suggesting that Americans usually believe their own side is being unfairly defeated or discriminated against — regardless of which side they happen to be on.

YouGov recently asked survey respondents whether they think the country has moved to the left or to the right over the past decade. The responses were split, with similar shares saying the country has become more liberal or more conservative.

If you break down responses by political leanings of respondents, though, a clearer pattern emerges. Liberals are most likely to say the country has shifted *right*, while most conservatives perceive the country as shifting *left*. The one thing nearly everyone agrees on: The country is always moving in the opposite direction of their own politics, whatever those politics are.

# Liberals see the U.S. as moving to the right while conservatives see it moving to the left

"In the past 10 years, would you say that the politics of the U.S. as a whole have...?"



Survey administered Nov. 3-6, 2023.

This is hardly the first recent poll suggesting that Americans perceive their own team or faction as falling behind.

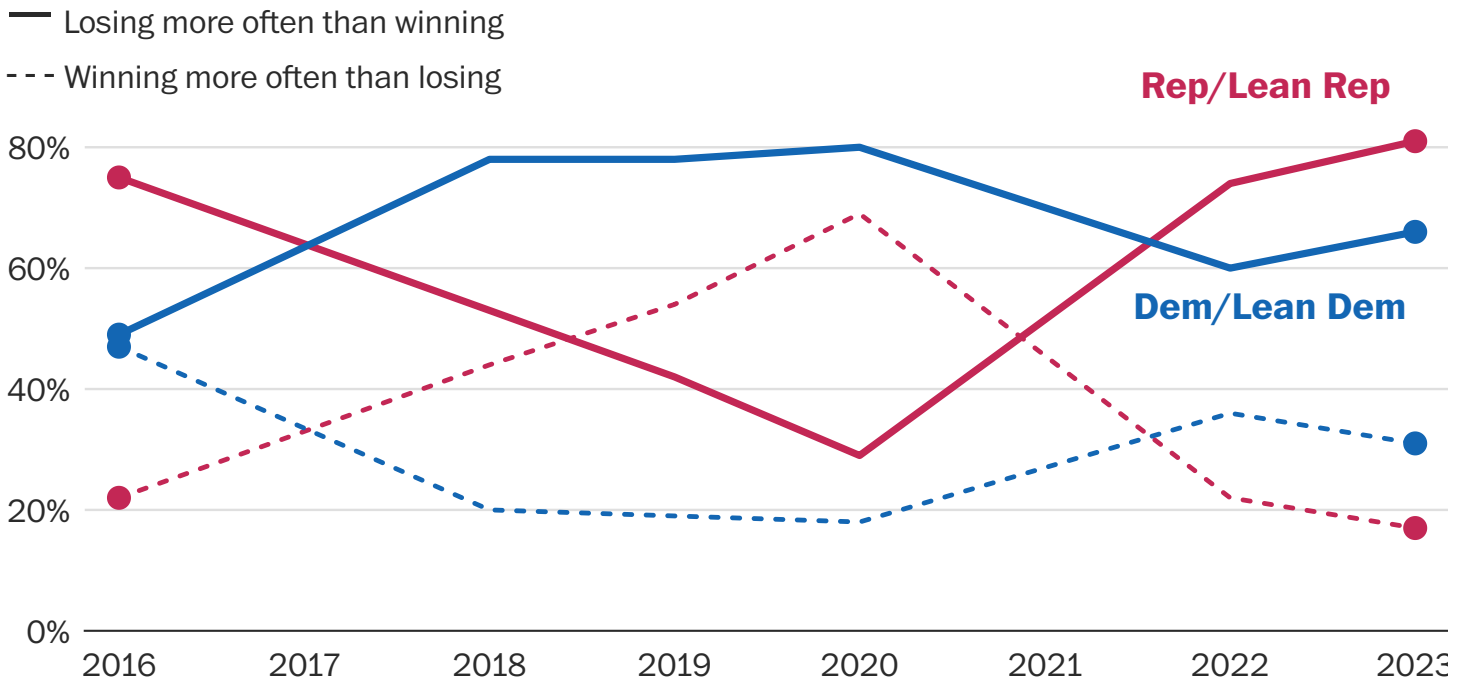


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In 2022, the Pew Research Center asked Americans more explicitly whether their political side has been losing more often than it has been winning. Majorities of both Democrats (66 percent) and Republicans (81 percent) declared that their own side has been losing more of the time. Needless to say, since there are only two major parties, this can't possibly be true.

# Both Republicans and Democrats feel they are losing politically on issues that matter to them



Most recent survey of U.S. adults was conducted Sept. 13-18, 2022.

Source: [Pew Research Center](#)

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Similar results can be found in questions about racial prejudice in U.S. society.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, among all major racial groups, Black Americans are most likely to say Black people face at least some discrimination. Same with Asians and Whites about their respective groups. (Hispanics are about as likely as Blacks to see anti-Hispanic bias.)

## Americans are especially likely to perceive bias against their own racial group

% of respondents who say there is "some" or "a lot" of different kinds of discrimination

	ANTI-BLACK	ANTI-HISPANIC
Black respondents	95	86
Hispanic respondents	83	83
Asian respondents	82	79

	ANTI-ASIAN	ANTI-WHITE
Black respondents	77	19
Hispanic respondents	69	28
Asian respondents	87	20
White respondents	68	48

White, Black and Asian adults include those who report being of only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Survey administered March 1-7, 2021.

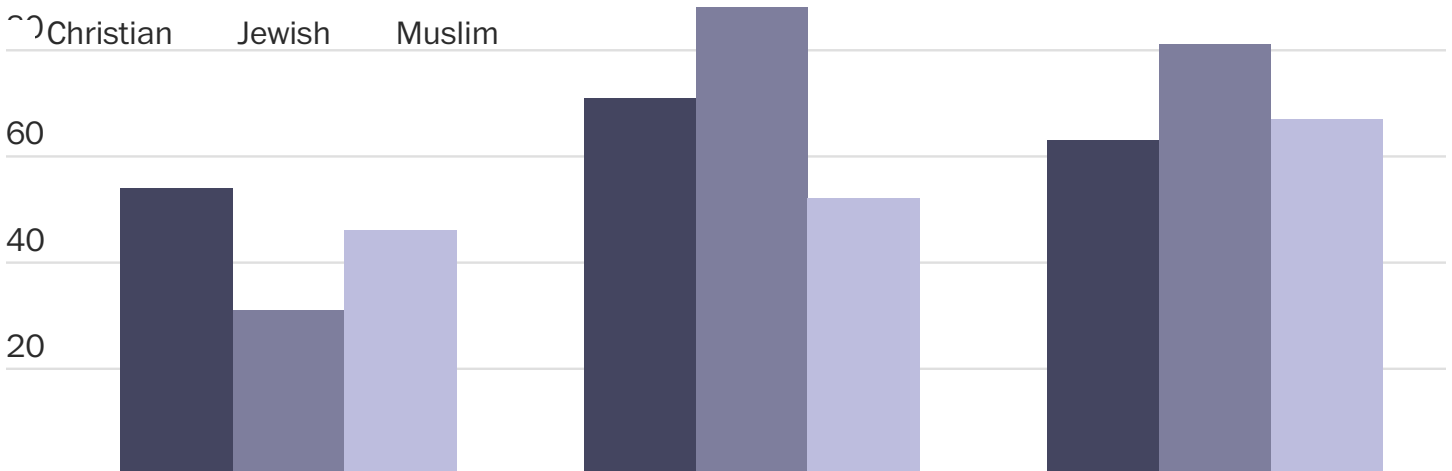
Source: [Pew Research Center](#)

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YouGov has also found some comparable patterns in perceptions of discrimination based on religious group. In surveys conducted this week at my request, Jews were the group most likely to say that Jews face discrimination. Likewise Christians about Christians. Muslims also report a lot of anti-Muslim discrimination (though Jews perceive it even more often).

## Christians and Jews are most likely to perceive bias against their own religious group

% responding that a given group faces “a fair amount” or “a great deal” of discrimination



Anti-Muslim discrimination  
Survey administered Jan. 4, 2024.

Source: [YouGov](#)

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Whatever a group's actual level of "privilege" (or lack thereof), everyone sees themselves as underprivileged, put-upon, low on the totem pole. It's a grievance culture, even for groups that once shunned this view of the world.

Republicans in the Reagan mold, after all, once appeared to believe that structural disadvantage was overblown, that opportunity abounded for all and that struggling Americans merely needed to lift themselves up by their bootstraps. More recently, conservatives mocked liberals for engaging in the "oppression Olympics," shorthand for a hierarchy in which greater levels of suffering or victimhood confer higher status.

But if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, it seems.

In the past decade, conservatives and the Republican Party have nurtured their own culture of grievance, with GOP politicians telling constituents that they've been systemically subjugated by the establishment, the swamp or maybe the deep state.

This was arguably Donald Trump's greatest political insight: that Republicans were, indeed, tired of winning. His followers are disproportionately White men, who are sick of hearing about how much they've benefited from patriarchy and racism. They don't want to be told they're victors, since they, too, face real challenges and economic stresses. Better to reassure them that all their problems are because of a system rigged against them, and that they can simply elect someone to unrig it.

It's a great voter mobilization tactic. But there are downsides to this universal "snowflake" culture.

One is that it clouds people's perspective about their relative advantages, while also robbing them of their agency. Whatever the downsides of denying structural disadvantages (including Reaganesque stinginess about government aid), the flip side is that telling people they're hopelessly downtrodden, especially when they're relatively well off in the grand scheme of things, might limit not just their empathy for others but also their motivation or drive.

This rhetoric also rationalizes greater spending of scarce public resources on those who don't need it, rather than those who really could use a leg up. This is one way to interpret both political parties' growing commitment to policies that resemble handouts for the well-off (e.g., shielding those at the 95th percentile from tax increases, or cutting taxes for those even wealthier; or student debt forgiveness even for newly minted Yale Law School grads).

If everyone's a loser — politically, economically, culturally — then everyone deserves a bigger share of the pie. Which is of course not how pie shares work.

The other risk is that telling everyone they're really the underdogs could provide moral license to behave badly. Not just badly; sometimes, violently. Why not lie, cheat, steal, subvert democracy and weaponize state power against your perceived enemies, if they're already doing the same to you? You're just leveling the playing field, right?

If all sides believe this, and if our politicians continue indulging such fantasies, escalation becomes inevitable. As we head into another election, there's an opening for a leader with a fresher message — say, that Americans should start acting more like the winners so many already are.