

# Is President Trump’s rhetoric racist? It depends on whom you ask.

Americans don’t agree on what’s racist.

By **Meredith Dost**, **Ryan D. Enos** and **Jennifer L. Hochschild**

August 12, 2019 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

Accusations and counter-accusations about President Trump’s rhetoric flared anew last week, after the mass shooting in El Paso. The accused gunman is believed to have posted [an anti-immigrant manifesto](#) describing immigration as an “invasion,” mirroring [the president’s language](#). [Politicians](#), [pundits](#) and other [observers](#) called Trump’s rhetoric racist and an incitement to violence.

Two days later, Brian Kilmeade of Fox News Channel [defended the president’s rhetoric](#), arguing that “if you use the term ‘invasion,’ it’s not anti-Hispanic, it’s a fact.” That pattern of charges and countercharges about Trump’s language has repeated since his campaign began. Just a week ago, Trump called for four nonwhite members of Congress, including the Somali-born U.S. citizen Ilhan Omar, to “go back” to where they came from. Once again, [politicians](#), pundits and [others](#) denounced the comments as racist, especially after Trump’s supporters chanted “[send her back](#)” at a campaign rally. The House even [passed a resolution](#) condemning the remarks.

But Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) countered that the remarks were not racist because such language [would not be used against a Somali immigrant “embracing Trump.”](#) And when Trump attacked Rep. Elijah E. Cummings (D-Md.), who is African American, and described the majority-black city of Baltimore [as a “rodent-infested mess”](#) — similarly attacked as racist — Trump defended himself as “just telling you the facts.”

As these incidents suggest, Americans have been disputing not what was said, but whether what was said was racist. Our research suggests that such a question reveals a deep moral and perceptual divide between Republicans and Democrats, and especially between Trump supporters and opponents.

Simply put, Americans don’t agree on what is and isn’t racism.

[\*Republicans don't think Trump's tweets are racist. That fits a long history of Americans denying racism.\*](#)

## **How we did our research**

Using the monthly online Harvard CAPS-Harris Poll, we asked a nationally representative sample of 2,296 American adults questions about race and politics in September 2017, before these recent events. Using a five-point scale that ranged from

“strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” we asked our subjects, for example, whether “saying that people in America should speak English is not racist.” (As is good practice in surveys, we randomly asked half of the respondents whether the statements “are racist” and the other half whether the same statements “are not racist;” here we combine the data and make the coding consistent.)

You can see a clear pattern in the results below. In every one of the 10 statements that we posed, Republicans were more likely than Democrats to agree that a given behavior or view is *not* racist. These differences are stark, with Republicans usually more than twice, and in some cases three times, as likely as Democrats to agree that an action is not racist.

What's racist? Graph by Ryan D. Enos and Jennifer L. Hochschild  
Self-identified strong Republicans and strong Democrats differ even more strikingly. Moreover, perhaps reflecting the president's influence, the differences between Trump supporters (those who approve of the job Trump is doing as president) and Trump opponents (those who disapprove) exceed or are comparable to the differences between partisans.

These contested views and behaviors cross a range of issues, from interpersonal (“telling a joke about a racial group”) to political (“voting for Donald Trump”). In every case, Democrats tend to agree that something is racist, while Republicans disagree.

[\*Why didn't more congressional Republicans condemn Trump's tweets about the "Squad"? These graphs explain.\*](#)

### **Explaining the divide**

There are several plausible reasons for this large partisan divide. [Over time](#), and particularly in the [past several years](#), Democrats and Republicans have moved further apart on [questions of race](#). This growing divide exists in how Democrats and Republicans [think about racism](#) as well.

Republicans may also be motivated to say that something is not racist because regardless of political affiliation, Americans overwhelmingly [adhere to a verbal norm of racial equality](#). They need to reconcile that belief with support for leaders such as Trump who are employing [racist rhetoric](#).

Such partisan-motivated reasoning probably cuts both ways. Indeed, Democrats may be tempted to state that any action they associate with Trump is racist.

The divide could represent something deeper, given the growing demographic divide between the parties. Because of different life experiences, deciding that a comment is or is not racist may come from a fundamentally different worldview or understanding of history.

Both political incentives and deeply held worldviews may contribute to the divide in beliefs about what is racist. Some of the biggest disagreements come over large, blanket

generalizations about the president (“Voting for Donald Trump is [not] racist”) or over the direction of his rhetoric (“Believing your country was a better place to live in the past is [not] racist”). But Trump is not the only lightning rod. Respondents also disagreed deeply about statements reflecting longer-term divisions (“Wanting to fly the Confederate flag is [not] racist”). Trump may have brought to the surface a deep difference in perspective that preceded him and is likely to continue after his presidency. As the 2020 election approaches, Trump may well double down on racially divisive language, as he did in the run-up to the 2018 election and during his 2016 campaign. With each Trump statement, many of his opponents again think that *this* may be last straw, that Republican politicians will condemn or even abandon the president and his public support will erode.

*Trump thinks racist rhetoric will help him in 2020. These data suggest otherwise.*

Each time, these opponents are disappointed. Our research gives insight into why: When judging what is and is not racist, Republicans and Democrats, Trump supporters and opponents, are talking past one another.