

An important part of political polarization is just in your head

Campaign 2016

×

State of the 2016 race

>

By **Andrew Gelman** April 5 at 4:00 PM

I never said all Democrats are saloon-keepers. What I said is that all saloon-keepers are Democrats. — Horace Greeley, 1860

For a long time I've felt that perceptions of polarization are a key contributor to political polarization. This was an underlying theme of the "Red State, Blue State" [paper](#) that I published with Boris Shor, Joseph Bafumi and David Park: People can become more polarized because they misunderstand who is voting for the Democratic and Republican candidates.

Douglas Ahler and Gaurav Sood [write](#):

We document a consequential and heretofore undiscovered perceptual phenomenon in American politics and public opinion: Americans considerably overestimate the share of party-stereotypical groups in the mass-level parties. For instance, on average, people think that 32% of Democratic supporters are LGBT (6% in reality) and 38% of Republican supporters earn over \$250,000 per year (2%). We experimentally demonstrate that these perceptions are genuine and party-specific, and not artifacts of expressive responding, innumeracy, or erroneous perceptions of group base rates. These misperceptions are relatively universal across partisan groups and positively associated with political interest. We experimentally document two political consequences of this perceptual bias: when provided information about the actual share of various party-stereotypical groups in the out-party, partisans come to see supporters of the out-party as less extreme and feel less socially distant from them. Thus, people's skewed mental images of the parties appear to fuel contemporary pathologies of partisanship.

Elsewhere, Ahler [writes](#):

A representative sample from California provides evidence that voters from both sides of the state's political divide perceive both their liberal and conservative peers' positions as more

extreme than they actually are, implying inaccurate beliefs about polarization. A second study again demonstrates this finding with an online sample and presents evidence that misperception of mass-level extremity can affect individuals' own policy opinions. Experimental participants randomly assigned to learn the actual average policy-related predispositions of liberal and conservative Americans later report opinions that are 8-13% more moderate, on average. Thus, citizens appear to consider peers' positions within public debate when forming their own opinions and adopt slightly more extreme positions as a consequence.

The topic is important, because political polarization isn't just about Democrats and Republicans in Congress, or even about the different policy positions of Democrats and Republicans involving taxes, health care, abortion, military spending and all the rest. Polarization is also contained in the views that Americans have regarding partisans of the other side — and for that, it's helpful to have data, not just to know that many Democrats despise Republicans and vice versa, but that Americans have such factual confusion and are inclined to see each party as a collection of stereotypes.

Several years ago I tried to gather some data on perceptions of polarization. Some colleagues and I devised an online activity where people could guess what percentage of people from different groups voted one way or another. We gathered some data from a couple of hundred responses, but the results were so noisy we couldn't really do anything with them.

So, in addition to appreciating this new work by Ahler and Sood, I also recognize the challenge of doing research in this important area.

Andrew Gelman is a professor of statistics and political science at Columbia University. His books include *Bayesian Data Analysis*; *Teaching Statistics: A Bag of Tricks*; and *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Why Americans Vote the Way They Do*.

The Post Recommends

At rallies, Hillary Clinton's supporters are looking for logic, not passion

The Democratic candidate has been criticized for not being emotional enough — but her supporters cheer her steadiness and embrace her wonkiness.

Sanders is losing the pillow fight with Clinton

The 'Clinton-Sanders debate' debate

Clinton prepares for Trump's insult machine, which has already turned her way

The businessman has called her "incompetent" and questioned her "stamina."

Looking for America

(Linda Davidson / The Washington Post)

The great unsettling

Ahead of the Iowa caucuses, as many expressions of hope as fear could be found.

By David Maraniss and
Robert Samuels

Longing for something lost

Awaiting a political awakening

A nation, divided