

Republicans and democrats less divided than commonly thought

January 28 2012

Republicans and Democrats are less divided in their attitudes than popularly believed, according to new research. It is exactly those perceptions of polarization, however, that help drive political engagement, researchers say.

"American polarization is largely exaggerated," says Leaf Van Boven of the University of Colorado Boulder, especially by people who adopt strong political stances. And when people perceive a large gap between political parties, they may be more motivated to vote. That message emerges from analyses of 40 years' worth of voter data and could help predict voting behavior for the 2012 presidential election, according to [social psychologists](#) presenting their work today at a conference in San Diego, CA.

Polarization and political engagement

Much of the data comes from the American National Election Studies, a large survey of American's [political attitudes](#) and voting behaviors from 1948 to 2008 funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), and from a nationally [representative sample](#) of American adults from 2008. Using a subset of 26,000 respondents from this data, [John Chambers](#) of the University of Florida and colleagues studied the degree to which people estimate differences between Republicans' and Democrats' attitudes. They found that the actual gap between the parties' political attitudes has not increased substantially over time and that members of

both parties have consistently overestimated the size of that gap.

Moreover, Chambers' team found that those who perceived the greatest political polarization were more politically engaged – for example, more likely to have voted in the last election, tried to influence the vote of other voters, attended political rallies, or donated money to a party or candidate. "These findings may have important implications for election outcomes," Chambers says. "Particularly in close or hotly-contested elections, the balance may be tipped in favor of the party whose members perceive more polarization between the two parties."

Indeed, in the 2008 Presidential election, people who strongly supported either Obama or McCain perceived Americans as more polarized than did people whose support for either of the two candidates was more moderate, according to work by Van Boven of the University of Colorado Boulder. His NSF-funded study likewise found that people who perceived Americans as more polarized were more inclined to vote in the [presidential election](#) compared with people who perceived less polarization – independent how strongly they supported Obama or McCain.

Morality drives people to the polls

In another analysis from the 2008 election, moral conviction also significantly predicted the likelihood to vote, even when statistically controlling for people's ideology, says G. Scott Morgan of Drew University. His research team surveyed 827 US residents about their political orientation, intentions to vote, and degrees of moral conviction on several issues, including abortion, same-sex marriage, tax cuts, and healthcare reform. They found that no party holds a monopoly on moral conviction.

The study counters the notion that conservatives' political views and

behaviors might be more greatly shaped by morality than those of liberals, Morgan says. Indeed, during the 2012 political campaign, he says "liberals and conservatives seem similarly likely to feel moral conviction about the issues that are important to them."

Moral convictions change factual beliefs

Other researchers are investigating how people view morally controversial political issues. They are finding that people's moral sensibilities shape their perceptions of facts.

Brittany Liu and Peter Ditto of the University of California, Irvine, tested how people's perceptions of the costs and benefits of capital punishment changed when they read essays advocating either its inherent morality or immorality. The essays changed not only participants' perceptions of the inherent morality of capital punishment but also beliefs about whether capital punishment deterred future crime or led to miscarriages of justice. "Changing participants' moral beliefs led to corresponding changes in factual beliefs," Liu says.

Related survey work found a similar pattern of results across many different issues, including forceful interrogations, stem cell research, abstinence-only sexual education, and global warming. The results help explain some of the major impediments to bipartisan cooperation, Liu says. "For both liberals and conservatives, there is no clean separation between moral intuitions and factual beliefs," she says. "This affects how politicians and partisans interpret scientific and economic data, making compromise difficult as both sides hold drastically different beliefs about the relevant facts and data."

Provided by SAGE Publications

Citation: Republicans and democrats less divided than commonly thought (2012, January 28)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2012-01-republicans-democrats-commonly-thought.html>

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