

Americans overestimate political polarization, according to new research

February 7 2012, By Leaf Van Boven



The misperception of American political polarization

(PhysOrg.com) -- Many Americans overestimate the degree of polarization between Democrats and Republicans, and this misconception is associated with citizens' voting behavior and their involvement in political activities, according to new findings from the University of Colorado Boulder.

“It is clear that Americans see themselves as very sharply polarized,” said Professor Leaf Van Boven, who led the research efforts. “And that the extent of perceived polarization dramatically overstates the actual degree of polarization.”

Van Boven of CU-Boulder's psychology and neuroscience department

and Professor John Chambers of the University of Florida presented findings of two studies on political polarization last month at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology in San Diego.

In one study, which included a nationally representative sample of 1,000 voting age respondents during the 2008 presidential campaign, Van Boven and his colleagues found that individuals with more extreme partisan attitudes perceived greater polarization than those with less extreme partisan attitudes. For example, in the 2008 presidential election, people who strongly supported either Obama or McCain perceived Americans as more divided than did those whose support of either candidate was more moderate.

In another study, which included an analysis using a subset of 26,000 respondents from three decades of surveys of Americans, the researchers determined that the average gap between Republicans and Democrats on five-point scales regarding different issues such as the death penalty and abortion was approximately three-quarters of a point. However, people believed there was a scale difference of two points or more between the two parties.

“The more strongly people feel about an issue, the more divided they see other Americans,” Van Boven said.

The data also suggest that the people who perceive the most division among Americans are also the most likely to vote in elections.

“It seems that the people who see the most polarization are also more likely to engage in various kinds of political activities, including joining campaigns, persuading other people and contributing to PACs,” Van Boven said. He expects that both major political parties may try to benefit from the perceived polarization of voters during the current

presidential election year.

“If I were a strategist and I saw that maybe I could get a 5 percent increase in turnout on my side by increasing people’s perceptions of polarization, I know exactly what I would do,” he said. “I would push toward increased perceptions of polarization.

“There certainly is a sound scientific basis for the strategy of making the other side seem very strong, very extreme and very active,” he said. “If I think the other side is really fired up and they are going to turn out the vote, that becomes a threat to me. So that might motivate me to vote.”

CU-Boulder Professor Charles Judd of the psychology and neuroscience department and Professor David Sherman of the University of California, Santa Barbara, were co-authors with Van Boven on the paper titled “False polarization of the American electorate.” Van Boven, CU-Boulder doctoral candidate Jacob Westfall and Professor John Chambers of the University of Florida co-authored the other paper titled “Political polarization projection.”

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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