

America's partisan divide: Not as simple as it seems

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(Phys.org)—Is the United States a bitterly divided country, split along harsh partisan political lines, or are we a nation composed mostly of moderates trapped between the extremists yelling from either end of the ideological spectrum?

Some scholars believe "there's a red and blue America and they're very divided, woe is the country," says Michael Wagner, an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and [Mass Communication](#) at UW-Madison. But other researchers' work shows that "most folks are fairly moderate and willing to compromise and don't see the other side as the enemy."

"How can both of those things be true?" asks Wagner, who studies how well democracy works, why people do what they do and how it affects the country.

The answer, Wagner says, is that we are not as simple as we seem and our ideology is more multidimensional than either of these approaches suggest.

"The problem with the research examining [polarization](#) and the problem with [media coverage](#) looking at it is it assumes that everyone thinks of themselves and behaves as a liberal or a conservative," he says.

Most [public opinion](#) surveys ask participants to identify themselves on a seven-point scale: extremely liberal; liberal; slightly liberal;

moderate/middle of the road; slightly conservative; conservative; extremely conservative. But about 30 percent of the public doesn't answer that question, Wagner says, while the majority of those who do answer say they are moderate.

"And so people run to the conclusion, 'Oh, we have a bunch of moderates,'" he says.

Citizens who hold consistently liberal or conservative positions on both social and [economic issues](#) have become more polarized along with the [political parties](#) that line up with their positions, Wagner's research shows. But his work has also found that a sizable number of people whose preferences on social and economic issues, such as someone who favors abortion rights but opposes higher taxes, don't line up with [Democrats](#) or [Republicans](#).

"These issues aren't organized in the same way for everyone, but the parties put them together in a very specific way, it just doesn't fit libertarians, communitarians, and moderates," Wagner says.

These people are more likely to shift their party allegiance in the short term and that affects how candidates must sometimes do verbal gymnastics to tailor their messages to them without upsetting their base.

Wagner and colleagues Edward G. Carmines from Indiana University and Michael J. Ensley from Kent State University will explore these questions in their forthcoming book, "Beyond the Left-Right Divide: How the Multidimensional Character of Mass Policy Preferences Affects American Politics," to be published later this year.

One chapter looks at where people choose to get information. Study participants were faced with pretend Internet search results on subjects including gun control and the fiscal cliff. Conservatives chose the link

for Fox News and liberals selected the story from MSNBC—they pick their "home team," Wagner says—while Libertarians' choice depended on how the issue and news source matched up with their ideology and how much they knew about politics.

Wagner wants to continue examining what explains people's ideology, potentially going beyond political questions and looking at how personal traits may drive their positions on issues.

"There's a greater diversity of opinion than we're led to believe," Wagner says. "People's political differences come from deeply held and honestly held positions."

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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