

Study finds partisanship most fierce among highly educated Americans

January 7 2015

While an educated public is undoubtedly a crucial element to a democratic society, a new study by two University of Kansas professors has found that partisanship appears to be highest among the most educated Americans.

"Though the facts may point in the opposite direction, highly educated partisans are fully capable of ignoring 'uncomfortable' facts and indeed often motivated to protect their [political beliefs](#)," said Mark Joslyn, a KU associate professor of [political science](#), who authored the study with Don Haider-Markel, a professor and chair of the KU Department Political Science.

The researchers examined surveys on how the public construed facts about highly politicized issues that included the 2003 Iraq War, global warming, evolution and the 2007 Iraq troop surge. While the study confirmed the value of education, the researchers said it was critical to examine the effect of partisanship among the educated electorate.

"Our findings do show that education, alone, increases the likelihood of construing the facts correctly," Joslyn said. "But when combined with partisanship, a common understanding of the facts diverge sharply. To the extent that a democratic system depends on an educated public able to discern facts from political fiction, our results should draw some concern. If the most educated portion of the public cannot agree on the facts, it would appear naïve to expect consensus in our representative institutions."

The study found, for example, that Republicans with high levels of education tended to support statements that were largely untrue but provided credence to the Bush administration's justification for the 2003 Iraq war, including that Iraq had ties to al-Qaida or that the U.S. found dictator Saddam Hussein's regime in possession of weapons of mass destruction. Well-educated Democrats disagreed with those sets of facts.

Joslyn said the key finding was that well-educated respondents disagreed more so along partisan lines than less-educated respondents in the survey. The study is not meant to criticize one political party over another, the researchers said, as they also found that well-educated Democrats supported incorrect facts about the effect of the 2007 troop surge, while Republicans correctly believed the surge once in place had decreased the rate of U.S. military casualties.

Joslyn said education does provide people with cognitive development that aids them in serving as democratic citizens. They are able to more easily access information, process it and evaluate the alternatives.

"Less understood, but no less important, is that education provides the cognitive tools to resist information inconsistent with held beliefs," Joslyn said. "Educated people possess greater cognitive resources and tools to counter facts incongruent with their dispositions and indeed exercise biases that reinforce convictions."

As part of further research, political scientists could study media consumption and its effect on partisanship, Joslyn said.

"Undoubtedly, the current media environment encourages people to gravitate toward the information sources that reinforce their existing beliefs," he said. "The Internet, with vast choices and contrary information, and partisan news sources on television appear to encourage

partisan polarization about the facts."

However, as politicians and voters lament partisanship and infighting that impede progress in Washington and state capitals across the country, the study provides insight perhaps into what has contributed to the political climate, the KU researchers said.

"If education does not create a common interpretation of political facts," Joslyn said, "then prospects of successful public debate and deliberation about such facts is questionable."

The study "Who Knows Best? Education, Partisanship and Contested Facts," published in December in the journal *Politics & Policy*.

More information: *Politics & Policy*, [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10...1111/polp.12098/full](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/polp.12098/full)

Provided by University of Kansas

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