

Political polarization: Often not as bad as we think

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As politics grows increasingly polarized, a new global study finds people often exaggerate political differences and negative feelings of those on the opposite side of the political divide, and this misperception can be

reduced by informing them of the other side's true feelings. The study replicates earlier research in the United States, finding the phenomenon to be generalizable across 25 countries.

The new study was led by Kai Ruggeri, Ph.D., assistant professor of health policy and management at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, and replicates a 2020 study by Jeffrey Lees and Mina Cikara at Harvard University, who were also co-authors of the new study. The new findings appear in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour*.

The Lee and Cikara study presented five political scenarios (e.g. banning anonymous political donations or changing the name given to the state highway) whereby one group proposes a change in law or policy which could disadvantage the other political party (Democrat or Republican). The new study replicated experiments from the original paper, testing the findings in 10,207 participants, following the original methodology as closely as possible and adapting group divisions and scenarios to the local political context for each of the other countries. For example, in Canada, they asked participants to respond to proposed changes to the way voting districts are defined; in Sudan, participants considered changes to the way water tariffs are calculated.

Says Ruggeri: "Our study provides evidence that people around the world overestimate the [negative feelings](#) of their political opponents, when in fact the other side is often much less negative than the perceptions we harbor about the other group. These misperceptions have real-world consequences, from polarization, intergroup conflict, and increasingly aggressive narratives in traditional and social media.

"While differences between the beliefs and actions of opposing political parties undoubtedly exist—particularly on widely covered issues like gun ownership or access to reproductive healthcare—their opinions on less reported issues are often more similar than we think. The findings from

our study suggest that focusing on issues without making them partisan matters, while also presenting accurate representations of group beliefs, can directly mitigate the exaggeration of polarization," he adds.

More information: The general fault in our fault lines, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-021-01092-x](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01092-x)

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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