

Studies examine different understandings, varieties of diversity

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Attitudes toward diversity vary, and its meaning can often be difficult to find consensus about in an increasingly diverse but politically polarized nation such as the United States.

In a report published by *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, University of Illinois Chicago researchers detail findings from three studies that explore the connection between [political ideology](#), attitudes, and beliefs toward diversity.

"Our studies explored the possibility that attitudes toward 'diversity' are multidimensional rather than unidimensional and that ideological differences in diversity attitudes vary as a function of diversity subtype," said the report's lead author Kathryn Howard, UIC doctoral candidate in psychology.

The first study investigated ideological differences in attitudes towards a wide variety of diversity features. Participants rated how much diversity or homogeneity they would desire in 23 different community features that could be considered relevant to diversity.

The study found more conservative participants preferred viewpoint diversity and more liberal participants preferred [demographic diversity](#).

The second study assessed participants' attitudes towards the general concept of diversity without providing a definition of the term. By investigating whether general attitudes towards diversity actually predict how people feel about specific types of diversity, the findings suggest that demographic features may be central to peoples' prototypes of diversity and that positive attitudes towards the general concept of diversity predicted demographic diversity preferences for both conservatives and liberals.

According to the researchers, "liberals were more likely than conservatives to endorse the general concept of diversity. Further, general diversity did not predict viewpoint diversity, but did significantly predict demographic diversity preferences. Thus, it may be that when people think of diversity in the abstract, people primarily imagine

differences in ethnic and cultural groups, and do not necessarily consider diversity in attitudes."

Because the first two studies found that diversity is multidimensional and contains at least two distinct factors—viewpoint and demographic diversity—the third study aimed to investigate possible variations in the perceived meaning of "diversity" by asking participants to judge the relevance of a set of features to diversity.

Respondents were asked to imagine "a very [diverse community](#)," and to think about "the types of people and places that exist in a very diverse community." They also had to determine how relevant 29 different community features were to their image of a diverse community.

"People do not perceive diversity as a unidimensional or even bi-dimensional construct, but rather likely perceive at least three categories of diversity. Further, people rated demographic features as most relevant to diversity, followed by viewpoint and consumer features. Lastly, conservatives rated viewpoint features as more relevant to diversity than liberals, and liberals rated demographic features as more relevant to diversity than conservatives," the report states.

"Conservatives and liberals do not differ only in their attitudes toward diversity, but they also differ in their understanding of what 'diversity' means. When asked to think about 'diversity,' liberals and conservatives think about different things; different aspects of social life come to mind," Howard said.

The divergent political and social media realms where liberals and conservatives are centered, combined with increased political and affective polarization, likely accounts for the difference of perspective on both sides, according to the researchers, who add that the results provide hope for bridging the liberal-[conservative](#) political divide.

"Once you recognize that existence of multiple components of 'diversity,' it opens the door to identifying some aspects of diversity on which liberals and conservatives agree," said Daniel Cervone, UIC professor of psychology and study co-author. "Breaking the concept of '[diversity](#)' into parts and identifying those parts on which people agree could be one small step toward reducing political polarization."

More information: Kathryn A. Howard et al, On the Varieties of Diversity: Ideological Variations in Attitudes Toward, and Understandings of Diversity, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/01461672211028141](https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211028141)

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