

"Opposing political views may trigger polarization on social media"

Many people find it easy to form political beliefs. Changing views can be more difficult.

A recent study among researchers in the social sciences suggests exposing people to opposing views might not be effective in changing their minds. In "Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization," published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, researchers studied Twitter users following bots that tweeted views opposing their own. In response to the bots, they found Republican Twitter users became more conservative in their views while Democrat Twitter users, more liberal. The Republican behavior was statistically significant, while the Democrat behavior wasn't. This polarizing trend is significant as the media continues to rely on Twitter activity as a source of political activity. To introduce people to a broad range of views, exposure to opposing views may "not only be ineffective but counterproductive," the researchers said.

The researchers measured tracked tweets to measure interactions among Twitter users. They created network graphs using circles to represent users and connected each circle with lines between their followers. They used these graphs to create an ideological scale of "liberal" to "conservative." They then surveyed Twitter users on policy issues to determine their level of ideology. They assigned some users to follow bots while giving no instruction to other users. These bots tweeted views of the opposing party. After a month, the users completed the same survey again.

The researchers used their findings to analyze three hypotheses about polarization other studies have shown. First, contact between groups can decrease polarization. This happens as users come into contact with and examine opposing views. The researchers suggested, despite this hypothesis, the anonymity of social media could have caused an increased polarization they observed. The lack of nonverbal communication such as facial cues could have caused this polarization. Secondly, exposure to opposing views may "backfire." This is because individuals use their own beliefs to correct opposing beliefs that contradict their own. The researchers did not observe any sort of correction among their Twitter users, though. Finally, other studies have shown conservatives backfire more often than liberals. This occurs because conservatives value certainty and tradition while liberals, diversity and change.

Their study had limitations. They could not generalize the study to all populations as they relied only on Twitter and did not observe the views of other groups such as Independents. This study used the idea that Republicans exhibit conservative beliefs while Democrats, liberal ones. In reality, Republican and Democrat views do not always exactly

align this way.

In the future, the researchers could continue to examine exactly how those political beliefs change. They could use precise methods of determining how individuals reason through their own beliefs. This may shed light on how to decrease political polarization and address political issues it can cause. Journalists and other researchers can also put these methods of polarization in other contexts such as historical trends. They can uncover and speculate on how polarization will shape up in the future.