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The Perception Gap: How False Impressions are Pulling Americans Apart



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ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

This report is published by More in Common, an international initiative to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media and government to connect people across the lines of division.

ABOUT THE HIDDEN TRIBES PROJECT

This is the third report published as part of More in Common's Hidden Tribes Project, whose focus is to better understand the forces that drive political polarization and tribalism in the United States today, and to galvanize efforts to address them. Previous publications were *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape* and *Midterms Report*.

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Executive Summary

Deepening polarization is affecting American life in many ways: causing increased interpersonal conflict, preventing progress on shared concerns, and undermining Americans' faith in democracy. A key driver of this polarization is the suspicion and distrust that exists between Americans of opposing political views.

This report provides insights into the ways in which opposing partisan groups perceive each other. It compares the extent to which Republicans and Democrats *think* they disagree with the amount they *actually* disagree: a "Perception Gap." It also examines how personal attributes (e.g. educational attainment) and behaviors (e.g. media consumption) can broaden or narrow the Perception Gap. These insights are intended not just to describe a problem, but to inform efforts to improve understanding between opposing partisan groups.

This study forms part of More in Common's Hidden Tribes project, the goal of which is to understand and counteract growing forces of polarization in the United States. One finding that emerged during our qualitative research interviews with Americans was a disconnection between the way participants described Americans from the opposing political party, and our own experience of those from the opposing party as we interviewed them. This finding prompted us to conduct a new phase of research after the 2018 midterm elections, to better understand this gap between perception and reality. Working with the international polling firm YouGov, More in Common fielded an online survey to a representative sample of 2,100 Americans. Participants were asked questions not just about their own views on a range of relevant political and policy issues, but also what they thought their *opponents* believed about such issues. This provides insight into how accurate or mistaken Americans are in their estimates of their opponents' views.

The findings are striking:

- **Democrats and Republicans imagine that almost twice as many people on the other side hold extreme¹ views than really do.**
 - **On average, Democrats and Republicans believe that 55 percent of their opponents' views are extreme, but in reality only about 30 percent are.**
- **Americans with more partisan views hold more exaggerated views of their opponents.**
 - **Members of America's "Exhausted Majority" have a narrower Perception Gap than either of the "Wings" (America's more politically partisan groups).**
- **Consumption of most forms of media, including talk radio, newspapers, social media, and local news, is associated with a wider Perception Gap.**
 - **For example, people who consume news "most of the time" are almost three times as inaccurate as those who consume it "only now and then".**
- **Furthermore, those who post about politics on social media show a substantially larger Perception Gap than those who do not.**

¹ For additional information on the use of the term "extreme," see page 56.

- Higher education among Democrats, but not Republicans, corresponds with a wider Perception Gap.
- For example, Democrats who hold a postgraduate degree are three times as inaccurate as those who did not graduate high school.
- This may be due in part to lower friendship diversity, as higher educated Democrats (but not Republicans) are more likely to say that "almost all" of their friends share their political views.
- The wider people's Perception Gap, the more likely they are to attribute negative personal qualities (like 'hateful' or 'brainwashed') to their opponents.
- Overall, Americans' views are more similar to their political opponents' than they realize.

Most Americans identify as either Democrats or Republicans, and while these sides have maintained robust political disagreements in the past, they typically did not view each other as presenting a threat to democracy itself. These days, however, that has changed, and politics is frequently viewed as a zero-sum game. This has been accompanied by an increasing tendency of both sides to view the other as extreme in their political views.

In reality, the results of this study suggest that Americans imagine themselves to be far more divided than they really are. While Americans will undoubtedly always harbor disagreements about issues ranging from tax law to gun control, the proportion of people holding more mainstream views about many of our most hotly debated issues is far greater than most Americans realize.

Furthermore, this study highlights possible sources for these mistaken perceptions. Two institutions intended to provide *greater* objective understanding of the world—the media and higher education—are in fact correlated with *less* accurate political perceptions. While we cannot determine whether these behaviors cause more inaccurate understandings directly, these relationships certainly raise questions about the role that higher education and media consumption have on shaping their consumers' political perceptions.

The statements used to measure Perception Gaps were selected to reflect a range of recent issues in political debate. The subjects range widely, from racism and immigration to climate change and gun rights. The size of Perception Gaps are no doubt affected by the choice of topics and framing of the issues. Further research could examine how the size of gaps differs across categories of issues. The emphasis in our analysis is however the existence of Perception Gaps, how they vary across groups, factors that exacerbate and reduce them, and the implications for our society's polarization.

While this research reveals disturbing trends, the overall message is positive: Americans often have more in common than they believe. Those with the greatest levels of hostility towards their political opponents typically understand them the least. This fundamental insight could be used as a basis for a more productive dialogue between opposing camps and moving forward on critical threats and challenges confronting the United States as we enter the 2020s.

Introduction

Americans are deeply concerned about their country's polarization. Nine in ten people say that America is more divided than at any point in their lifetimes², and in the past twenty years, the proportion of people holding very negative views of their opponents has doubled^{3,4}. As polarization has deepened, so too has pessimism about political institutions themselves. Only a small fraction of Americans currently approve of their Congressional representatives⁵ (a figure substantially lower than twenty years ago⁶) and approximately 40 percent of Americans say they have "lost faith" in American democracy⁷.

More in Common's October 2018 report entitled *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape* investigated the extent and nature of this polarization. It found that a set of psychological attributes described as "core beliefs" were highly predictive of political viewpoints. This underscored the perspective, also advanced by psychologists, that ideological differences are often driven by fundamental distinctions in values and worldviews. These insights proved valuable for understanding how and why Americans differ on a wide array of social, political, and policy issues.

Since the 2016 general election, there has been widespread debate about the extent and relevance of online disinformation in perpetuating America's polarization. Even without the 'fake news' phenomenon, the diminished role of traditional media and the proliferation of partisan news sources means that Americans no longer have a common understanding of current issues and debates. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, Americans increasingly live within isolated information bubbles. Further, even when opposing sides are focused on the same issue and share similar information sources, they often draw wildly different conclusions from the same evidence⁸. The loss of common sources and understandings of external circumstances makes it far harder for people on opposing sides to work together.

The fact that each side is becoming increasingly divided in their understanding of what is happening in America today raises the question of whether a key dimension of polarization is people's understanding of their *opponents'* views. What, in other words, do people think others believe? This question is important because those perceptions can influence people's behavior in profound ways. If people hold wrongheaded visions of the other side, then, like Don Quixote tilting at windmills, they may gird themselves against opponents of a different nature than they imagine. This, in turn, may exacerbate breakdowns in trust and dialogue⁹. For example, research has shown that holding exaggerated views of one's opponent can lead people to endorse more extreme or even violent actions against them¹⁰.

² Hawkins, Yudkin, Juan-Torres, & Dixon (2018b)

³ Iyengar, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood (2018)

⁴ Pew (2014). <https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/political-polarization/>

⁵ Quinnipiac (2017). <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2477>

⁶ Dugan (2015). <http://news.gallup.com/poll/185918/majority-americans-congress-touch-corrupt.aspx>

⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americans-are-losing-faith-in-democracy--and-in-each-other/2016/10/14/b35234ea-90c6-11e6-9c52-0b10449e33c4_story.html?utm_term=.f9ee874e905d

⁸ Mercier & Sperber (2017)

⁹ Enders & Armaly (2018)

¹⁰ Jervis (1988)

The purpose of this report is to shed light on what social scientists term **second order beliefs**¹¹—that is, what people think others believe. Can Democrats and Republicans accurately estimate what those on the other side of the fence believe about a variety of issues? Or do they fundamentally exaggerate the extremity of the other side's views? This question has been posed in past research¹², but has gained renewed importance in this era of deepening division and polarization. Furthermore, it is still not known how certain behaviors—such as receiving an education or the consumption of media—affect people's misperceptions of their opponents. Answering this question can help to shed light on some of the underlying causes of misperceptions of each other.

Overall, if Americans do indeed hold distorted views of their political opponents, it would reveal one important factor contributing to the intense state of polarization we are experiencing today. It would suggest that Americans are not only polarized due to differences in their beliefs, but also due to an *overestimation of the magnitude of these differences*. By better understanding the role of misperceptions in our widening divisions, we can thereby identify steps that can address those misperceptions and reduce partisans' sense of threat from their opponents. This, in turn, may play a role in improving understanding and creating a more productive engagement across lines of division.

¹¹ Sullivan, Zaitchik, & Tager-Flusberg (1994)

¹² See Further Reading, p. 53

Methodology

I. Data Collection

More in Common collaborated with global data and public opinion company YouGov to conduct a large-scale representative survey of Americans to understand second-order beliefs in the US. The survey was conducted among a sample of 2,100 US adults (974 male, 1126 female, mean age 49) from November 7th to 10th, 2018—the week immediately following the 2018 midterm elections. The sample consisted of a subset of respondents who had participated in an earlier survey of 8,000 participants on political attitudes in the United States, the results of which were published in October 2018 in the report *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape*.¹³ This study has an overall margin of error of +/- 2.1 percent, and higher for analyzing the population that voted and other subgroups.

II. Measures

Political Identification. In the original survey, participants indicated whether they thought of themselves as an “Independent,” “Democrat,” or “Republican.” We used this as a basis for categorizing participants into one of these three categories.

Political Views. Participants who identified as a Democrat (N = 936) or Republican (N = 755) were asked to provide their opinion regarding each of a series of seven statements concerning policy issues and political attitudes. The statements differed according to party. For each statement, participants were asked to indicate whether they generally **agreed** or **disagreed** with that statement:

REPUBLICAN QUESTION SET

- “Properly controlled immigration can be good for America”
- “Racism still exists in America”
- “People are right to be concerned about how climate change might affect us”
- “The government should do more to stop guns getting into the hands of bad people”
- “Donald Trump is a flawed person”
- “Many Muslims are good Americans”
- “Sexism still exists in America”

DEMOCRAT QUESTION SET

- “The US should have completely open borders”
- “The US should abolish ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement)”
- “Most police are bad people”
- “America should be a socialist country”
- “Law abiding citizens should have the right to bear firearms”

¹³ Hawkins, Yudkin, Juan-Torres & Dixon (2018a)

- “It is important that men are protected from false accusations pertaining to sexual assault”
- “I am proud to be American though I acknowledge my country’s flaws”

Second Order Beliefs. After indicating their agreement or disagreement with each of the seven statements, participants then proceeded to the “Estimation” portion of the survey. Here respondents estimated, on a scale from 0 to 100, the percentage of their political opponents who had agreed with each of the statements. Accordingly, Democrats were presented with each of the statements from the Republican Question Set and were asked, for each question, what percentage of Republicans they believed agreed with that statement. Similarly, Republicans were presented with each of the items from the Democrat Question Set and asked what percentage of Democrats agreed with each statement.

The estimation portion of the survey was phrased in the following way:

Next we want to ask you about what you think Democratic [Republican] voters believe about certain issues. What percentage of Democratic [Republican] voters do you think believe that...” (0 to 100).

Independents (N = 409) responded to the estimation part of the survey for both the Democrat and Republican Question Set. They did not provide their own political views.

CHARACTER JUDGMENTS

In addition to assessing people’s second-order beliefs, participants responded to a set of questions on character judgments of members of the opposing political party. These included the degree to which people believed their political opponents were:

- Brainwashed
- Hateful
- Racist
- Reasonable
- Honest
- Caring

Because the sample consisted of participants who had already provided their responses to a previous survey, we were able to obtain information about a variety of demographic variables, including age, gender, income, and education. In addition, respondents responded to a standard question used by YouGov regarding media consumption habits, including the frequency with which they consumed media including television, radio, and online and in-print journalism. Specifically, they answered the question:

***Which of the following news sources (in any format broadcast or online) have you used regularly in the past month for news about government and politics?
Mark all that apply.***

- Sources such as Slate, Buzzfeed, Daily Kos, or Huffington Post
- Newspapers like The New York Times or the Washington Post
- MSNBC
- CNN
- FOX News Network

- ABC, CBS, NBC
- Local television news, radio, or newspapers in your area
- Newspapers like The Wall Street Journal, or the Washington Times
- Talk Radio programs like Rush Limbaugh or the Sean Hannity Show
- Breitbart News
- Sources such as the Drudge Report, Redstate.com, or HotAir.com
- Religious news sources like The Christian Post or the Christian News Network
- Social media sources like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat
- None of the above

Overall, this gave us the opportunity to examine the personal habits and characteristics that correlated with misperceptions.

III. Analysis and Calculations

The study's goal was to determine how right or wrong Americans are in their estimates of each others' views. To do this, we first calculated the number of people of each political identity who agreed with each statement (see Tables 1 and 2). Certain statements were reverse-scored so that the statement always corresponded with the more mainstream (less partisan) political position. For example, for Democrats, disagreeing with the statement that "The US should have completely open borders" constitutes the mainstream view. For Republicans, agreeing that "Racism still exists in America" would constitute the mainstream view.

Next, we calculated, for each person, a "Perception Gap," which quantifies the accuracy of their second-order beliefs. The Perception Gap for each item was computed by calculating the percentage difference between each respondent's *estimate* of how many people held a certain view and the *actual* percentage of people who held that view. For example, if a Democrat estimated that 50 percent of Republicans believed that racism still exists in America, but in fact, 60 percent do, then their Perception Gap for this issue would be 10 percent.

After performing this calculation for each item for each person, we then created an averaged Perception Gap for each person by averaging across each of the seven items that person had responded to. The Perception Gap for each person, therefore, represented the average deviation of that person's estimates from reality across all seven items.

Once we had computed an average Perception Gap for each individual, we could then look at the trend within each party by averaging the inaccuracy scores of each person within that party. Because Independents had estimated the views of both Democrats and Republicans, a separate Perception Gap was calculated for each of their estimates of the views of both parties, respectively, and a total Perception Gap score was computed by averaging these two scores. For Democrats and Republicans the Perception Gap was created simply by averaging across estimates they made for the opposite party. These indices had a margin of error of approximately +/- 2.2 percent for Democrats, 2.5 percent for Republicans, and 3.8 percent for Independents.

Chapter

1

America's Perception Gap

Democrats and Republicans overestimate the proportion of their opponents who hold extreme¹⁴ views by a factor of almost 2. While on average, they believe that 55 percent of their opponents' hold extreme views, in reality only about 30 percent are.¹⁵

The number of Republicans who hold extreme views (34 percent) is only about two thirds what Democrats believe (53 percent). The number of Democrats who hold extreme views (29 percent) is only about half what Republicans believe (56 percent).

Independents' Perception Gap of both Republicans and Democrats is smaller than the Perception Gap of affiliates of either party, but still sizable. For example, Independents estimate that 53 percent of Republicans hold mainstream views (when in fact, as mentioned above, 66 percent do), yielding a Perception Gap of 13 percentage points for Republicans. They estimate that 51 percent of Democrats hold mainstream views (while as mentioned above, 71 do), yielding a Perception Gap of 20 percentage points for Democrats' views. The average Perception Gap of Independents across both parties is 16.

Overall, then, both Democrats and Republicans have a much higher Perception Gap than Independents, but the study clearly finds that Americans of all persuasions overestimate the extent to which other Americans hold extreme views.

One proviso should be added. While it may be tempting to compare the absolute differences between the parties and to draw conclusions about the relative accuracy or inaccuracy of each party's views about the other, the value of this approach is limited by the fact that each party responded to different question sets. Of course the Perception Gap measures the *difference* between the perceptions of partisans and their opponents' actual beliefs. Nevertheless, the choice of questions will influence differences in the Perception Gap between Democrats and Republicans. Caution should therefore be exercised in interpreting these results as an objective measure of differences in each party's perceptions of the other.

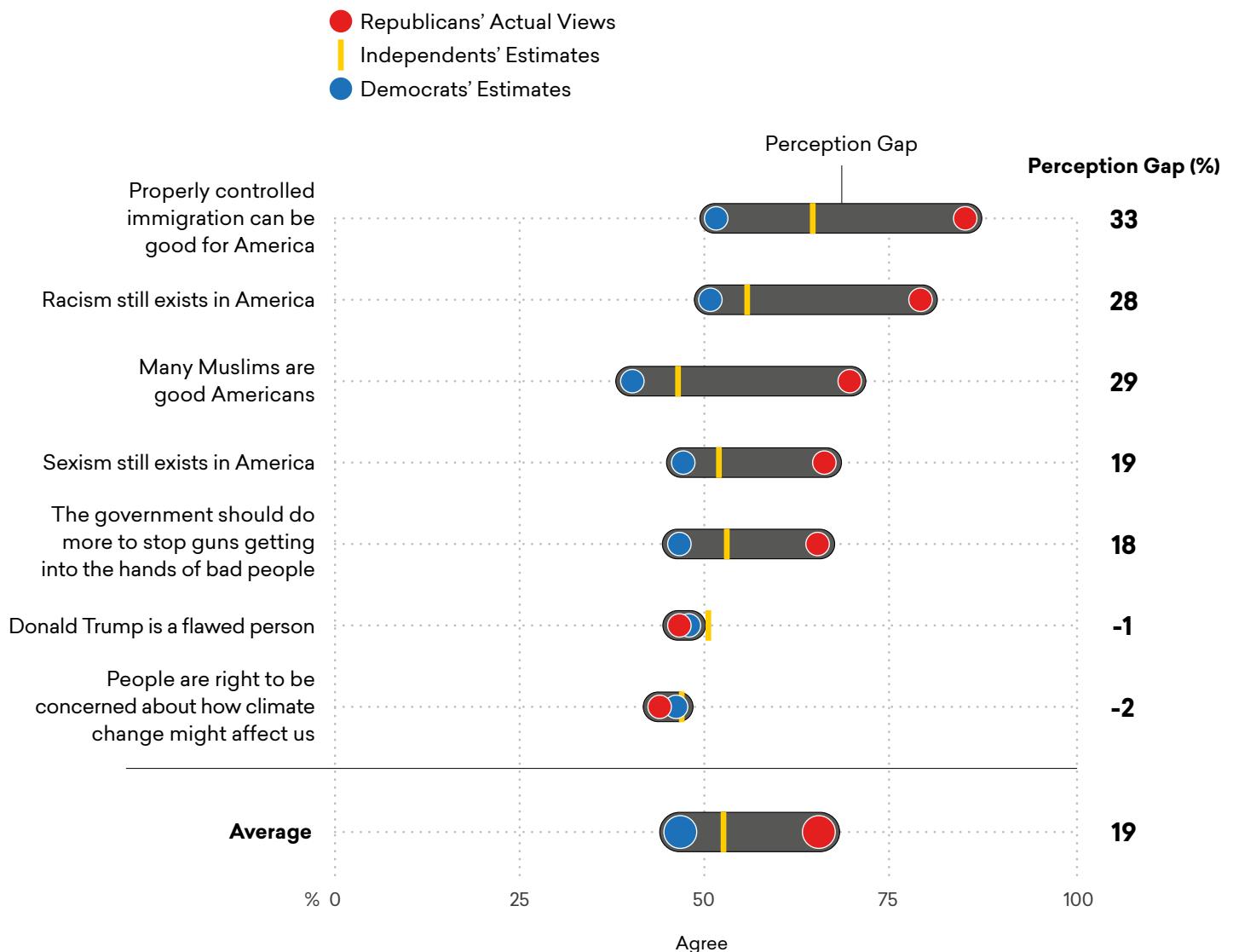
¹⁴ For additional information on the use of the term "extreme," see page 56.

¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, this report uses the term "percent difference" to reflect the arithmetic difference in percentage points between estimate and reality, rather than a proportion.

Figure 1

Democrats' Perception Gap

Actual Republican views, contrasted with Democrats' (and Independents') estimates of those views

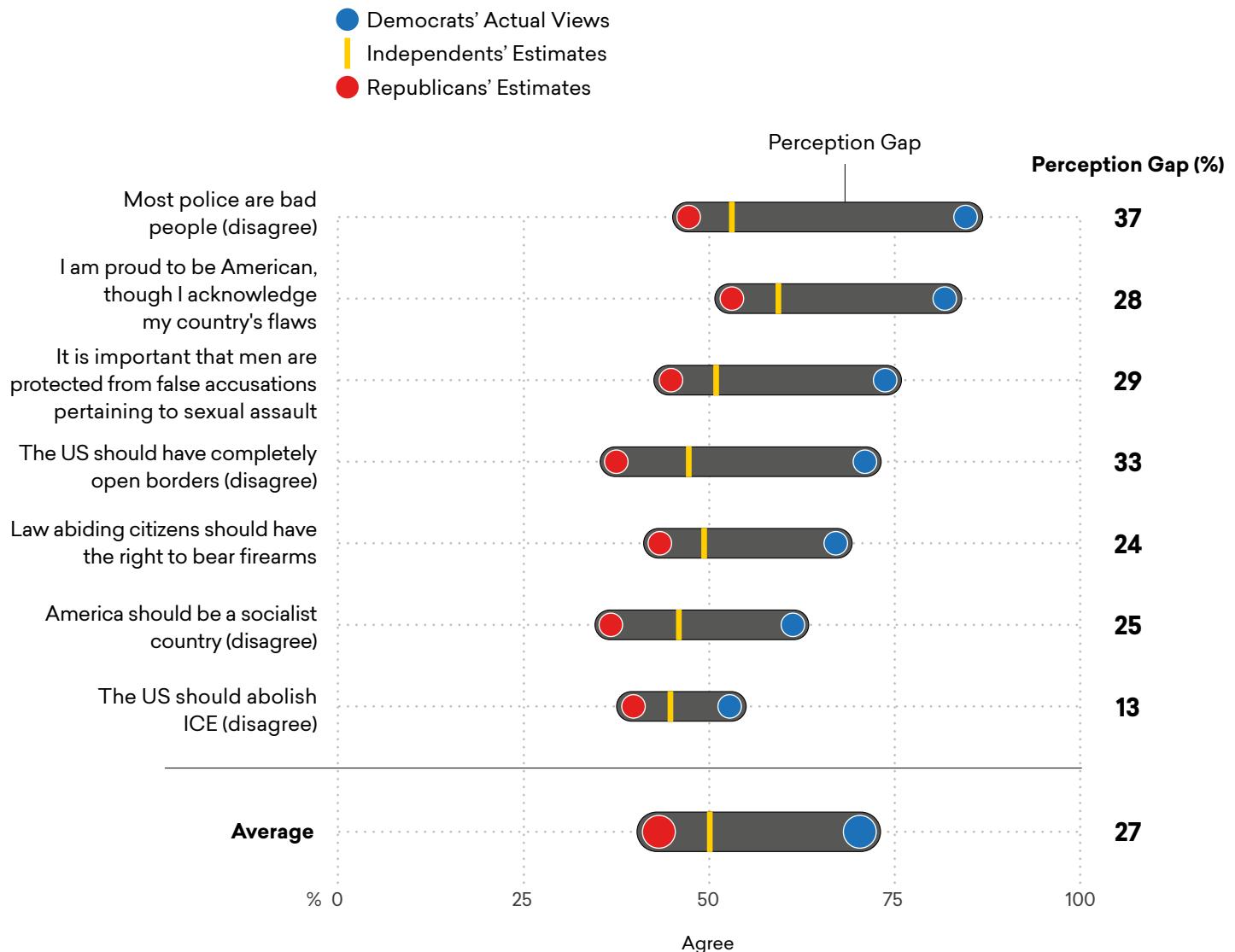


Source: More in Common (2019)

Figure 2

Republicans' Perception Gap

Actual Democrat views, contrasted with Republicans' (and Independents') estimates of those views



Source: More in Common (2019)

Inaccuracy By Issue

The Perception Gap varies across issues. Democrats are least accurate in their estimation of Republicans' beliefs about immigration and race. Democrats imagine that only half (52 percent) of Republicans think that properly controlled immigration can be good for America, while the vast majority (85 percent) actually do. Similarly, Democrats estimate that about half of Republicans (51 percent) would admit that racism is still a problem in America, when, in fact, significantly more Republicans actually do (79 percent). In other words, issues of immigration and racial prejudice are areas where Republicans are, on average, closer to what Democrats believe than most Democrats would imagine (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

There are other issues, by contrast, where Democrats are highly *accurate* in their estimates of Republicans' views. For example, Democrats are remarkably accurate in estimating that 47 percent of Republicans agree that Donald Trump is a flawed person (48 percent do). Similarly, Democrats are accurate in estimating that only 44 percent of Republicans agree that people are right to be worried about climate change (46 percent of Republicans actually do).

Republicans appear most likely to hold inaccurate perceptions of Democrats' views about law enforcement, gender issues, 'open borders' immigration policies and patriotism. For example, twice as many Democrats disagree with the statement that "most police are bad people" (85 percent) than Republicans imagine (48 percent). Similarly, proportionally almost twice as many Democrats reject the notion of open borders for immigration than Republicans think (71 percent in reality versus 38 estimated). Republicans also estimate that just over half of Democrats (54 percent) feel proud to be American, when more than four out of every five Democrats share that sense of national pride (82 percent).

Republicans hold more accurate perceptions of Democrats' views about the abolition of the immigration enforcement agency ICE (40 percent versus 53 percent). They are also somewhat more accurate about Democrats' views on the right to bear firearms (68 percent support, while Republicans think 44 percent do), though this is still a proportional difference of over 50 percent. The remainder of Republicans' estimates are even more inaccurate (see Table 2 and Figure 2).

While Independents' Perception Gap is smaller across virtually all issues, they still maintain considerably inaccurate views of both parties. For example, Independents exaggerate Republican opposition to immigration and Republicans' denials of the existence of racism (by 20 and 23 percentage points, respectively). However, like Democrats, they are more accurate in their estimates of Republican denials of Trump's flaws and climate change denial (indeed, they slightly *underestimate* the proportion of Republicans with more extreme positions on these issues, by 3 percent and 1 percent, respectively). There is a similar pattern in Independents' perceptions relating to Democrats, with very exaggerated views of Democrats' beliefs around police being bad people (31 percent of the actual number). Independents are most accurate in their estimation of Democrats' views on ICE (they estimate 45 percent would disagree when in fact 53 percent do).

Overall, there are significant inaccuracies in Americans' perceptions of their opponents, with many perceiving them to be more extreme than they really are. Both Republicans and Democrats seem to exaggerate their opponents' views regarding the issue of immigration in particular. Democrats think that far more Republicans totally oppose immigration than actually do, and Republicans think that far more Democrats want open borders than actually do. In reality, the two camps are more aligned on immigration issues than either of them seem to realize.

Table 1

Republicans' views on a variety of political subjects and Democrats' and Independents' estimates of those views

	Republicans' Views	Democrats' Estimates	Perception Gap	Independents' Estimates	Perception Gap
Properly controlled immigration can be good for America	85%	52%	33%	65%	20%
Racism still exists in America	79%	51%	28%	56%	23%
Many Muslims are good Americans	70%	41%	29%	47%	23%
Sexism still exists in America	66%	47%	19%	52%	14%
The government should do more to stop guns getting into the hands of bad people	65%	47%	18%	53%	12%
Donald Trump is a flawed person	48%	47%	-1%	51%	3%
People are right to be concerned about how climate change might affect us	46%	44%	-2%	47%	1%

Table 2

Democrats' views on a variety of political subjects and Republicans' and Independents' estimates of those views

	Democrats' Views	Republicans' Estimates	Perception Gap	Independents' Estimates	Perception Gap
Most police are bad people (disagree)	85%	48%	37%	54%	31%
I am proud to be American, though I acknowledge my country's flaws	82%	54%	28%	60%	22%
It is important that men are protected from false accusations pertaining to sexual assault	74%	45%	29%	51%	23%
The US should have completely open borders (disagree)	71%	38%	33%	48%	23%
Law abiding citizens should have the right to bear firearms	68%	44%	24%	50%	18%
America should be a socialist country (disagree)	62%	37%	25%	46%	16%
The US should abolish ICE (disagree)	53%	40%	13%	45%	8%

Chapter

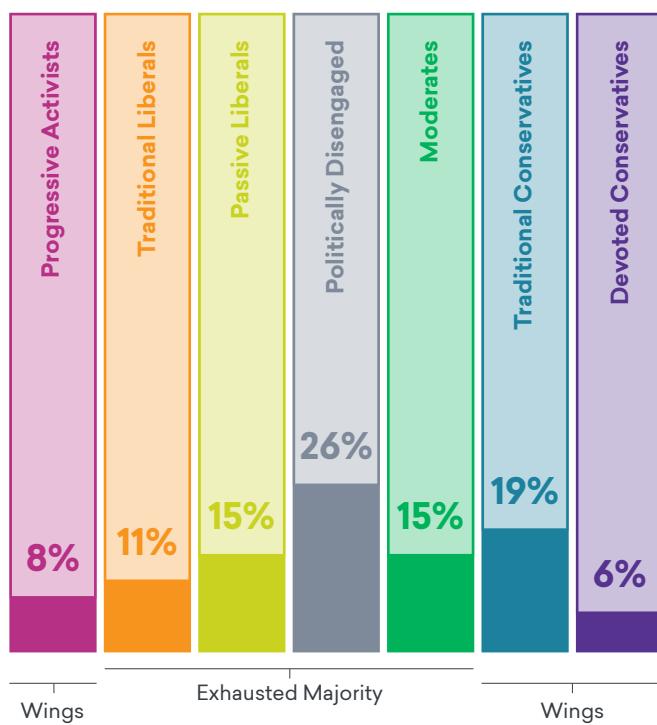
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“Hidden Tribes” Analysis

In addition to examining the accuracy of Americans' estimates according to their explicit political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, Independent), we also examined Americans' perceptions of others' beliefs through the lens of the seven population segments identified in the report *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarization*¹⁶.

The segmentation analysis for the Hidden Tribes report was based on a wide range of questions about individuals' underlying beliefs, group attachments and levels of political activity and engagement. The seven segments identified in the report are Progressive Activists, Traditional Liberals, Passive Liberals, Politically Disengaged, Moderates, Traditional Conservatives, and Devoted Conservatives. The Progressive Activists, Traditional Liberals and Passive Liberals lean strongly towards the Democratic Party, while the Traditional Conservatives and Devoted Conservatives lean strongly towards the Republican Party.

Figure 3 — **The Hidden Tribes of America**



Source: More in Common (2019)

We calculated the Perception Gap for each segment by averaging the Perception Gaps among all the members of each segment. The analysis showed strongly misguided estimates of each party's views, particularly among the Wing groups (that is, Progressive Activists, Traditional Conservatives, and Devoted Conservatives). As previously noted, across all issues 66 percent of Republicans held mainstream views. Progressive Activists estimate that only 33 percent of Republicans' views are mainstream, yielding a Perception Gap of 33 percent. Expressed proportionally, this means that Republicans are *twice as likely* to hold mainstream views as Progressive Activists believe.

¹⁶ Hawkins, Yudkin, Juan-Torres, & Dixon (2018a)

On many issues, there are well over twice as many Republicans who hold mainstream views than Progressive Activists estimate. Proportionally, they are most inaccurate about Republicans' beliefs about Muslims. While Progressive Activists think that only 26 percent of Republicans think that many Muslims are good Americans, almost three times as many (70 percent) actually do. More than twice as many Republicans as Progressive Activists believe also support stricter gun control (30 percent estimated versus 66 percent actual), support properly controlled immigration (40 percent estimated versus 85 percent actual), believe that racism still exists (32 percent estimated versus 80 percent actual), and believe that sexism still exists (30 percent estimated versus 66 percent estimated).

A similar pattern is observable for Devoted Conservatives' perception of Democrats' views. While 71 percent of Democrats hold mainstream views, Devoted Conservatives believe that only 36 percent do: a Perception Gap of 35 percentage points. In other words, twice as many Democrats hold mainstream views as Devoted Conservatives believe.

Proportionally, Devoted Conservatives are most inaccurate about Democrats' views regarding having an open border: they think that only 29 percent of Democrats oppose open borders, while in fact a full 71 percent actually do. Similarly, while only 15 percent of Democrats agree that "most police are bad people" Devoted Conservatives estimate that four times as many (60 percent) do. And while the vast majority of Democrats (74 percent) think that men should be protected from false allegations of sexual assault, Devoted Conservatives think that half that number (37 percent) hold this view.

Table 3

Progressive Activists' estimates of Republicans' views

The table shows, for each issue, what percent of Republicans Progressive Activists think hold each view, and what percent actually do

	Republican View	Progressive Activists' Estimates	Perception Gap
Properly controlled immigration can be good for America	85%	40%	45%
Racism still exists in America	79%	32%	47%
Many Muslims are good Americans	70%	26%	44%
Sexism still exists in America	66%	30%	36%
The government should do more to stop guns getting into the hands of bad people	65%	30%	35%
Donald Trump is a flawed person	48%	39%	9%
People are right to be concerned about how climate change might affect us	46%	28%	18%

Table 4

Devoted Conservatives' estimates of Democrats' views

The table shows, for each issue, what percent of Democrats Devoted Conservatives think hold each view, and what percent actually do

Democrats' Views	Devoted Conservatives' Estimates	Perception Gap
Most police are bad people (disagree)	85%	39%
I am proud to be American, though I acknowledge my country's flaws	82%	44%
It is important that men are protected from false accusations pertaining to sexual assault	74%	37%
The US should have completely open borders (disagree)	71%	29%
Law abiding citizens should have the right to bear firearms	68%	35%
America should be a socialist country (disagree)	62%	30%
The US should abolish ICE (disagree)	53%	34%

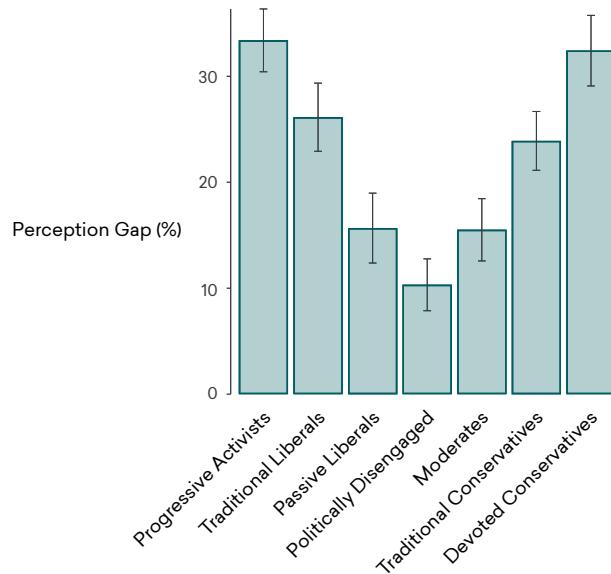
The considerable inaccuracies of the most ideological tribes are not shared by Americans in the less ideological segments. For example, Passive Liberals are off in their estimates of Republicans by an average of 16 percentage points—17 points less than Progressive Activists. A comparison of the Perception Gap among the seven segments shows a remarkable V-shape. Traditional Liberals and Traditional Conservatives are both more accurate in their perceptions than the two most ideological tribes. But the middle three groups (Passive Liberals, Politically Disengaged and Moderates) are substantially more accurate again. Remarkably, the Politically Disengaged are the group that is least informed and least active politically—yet the most accurate in their views. The Politically Disengaged have the least educational attainment and are the most politically uninformed of all the groups. The fact that they are also the most *accurate* suggests that Americans' misperceptions are not just the result of innumeracy or difficulty estimating others' views.

In sum, it appears that people who do not hold strong partisan views have a more accurate understanding of both sides than their more partisan counterparts. Of course, support for extreme views is inherently dangerous, regardless of scale. Nevertheless, the number of people who hold extreme views is much less than most politically engaged Americans tend to imagine.

Figure 4

A V-shape in the Perception Gap

Graph shows the average Perception of both Democrats' and Republicans' views across all seven political tribes, and shows that the Politically Disengaged have the smallest Perception Gap. Error bars = 95% confidence interval.



Source: More in Common (2019)

The Exhausted Majority

Further insights into the connection between polarization and misperceptions can be gained from exploring the differences between the two-thirds of Americans in the Exhausted Majority groups against the one-third that belong to the Wing groups. The Hidden Tribes report identified the Exhausted Majority as a subset of tribes (Traditional Liberals, Passive Liberals, Politically Disengaged, and Moderates) that shared four main attributes:

- they are more ideologically flexible
- they support finding political compromise
- they are fatigued by US politics today
- they feel forgotten in political debate

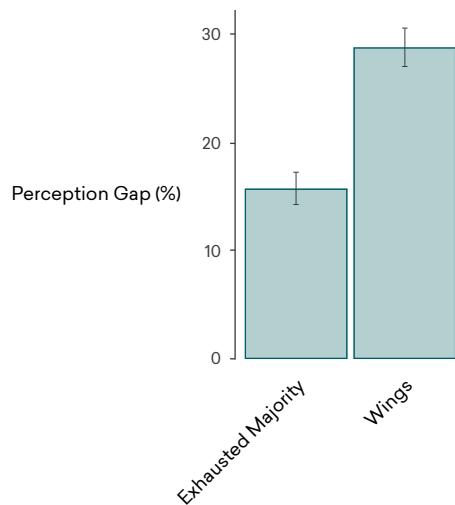
Table 5**Frequency of Exhausted Majority versus the Wings**

	Number in Sample	Percent of Sample
Wings	840	40%
Exhausted Majority	1260	60%

The much higher level of engagement among the Wing groups makes all the more remarkable the finding that members of the Exhausted Majority have a better understanding of the views of both Republicans and Democrats than those in the Wings. In fact, the Perception Gap among the Wings (29 percentage points) is almost twice as large as that of the Exhausted Majority (16 percentage points).

Figure 5**The Perception Gap of the Exhausted Majority and the Wings**

Error bars = 95% confidence interval.



Source: More in Common (2019)

Political Partisanship

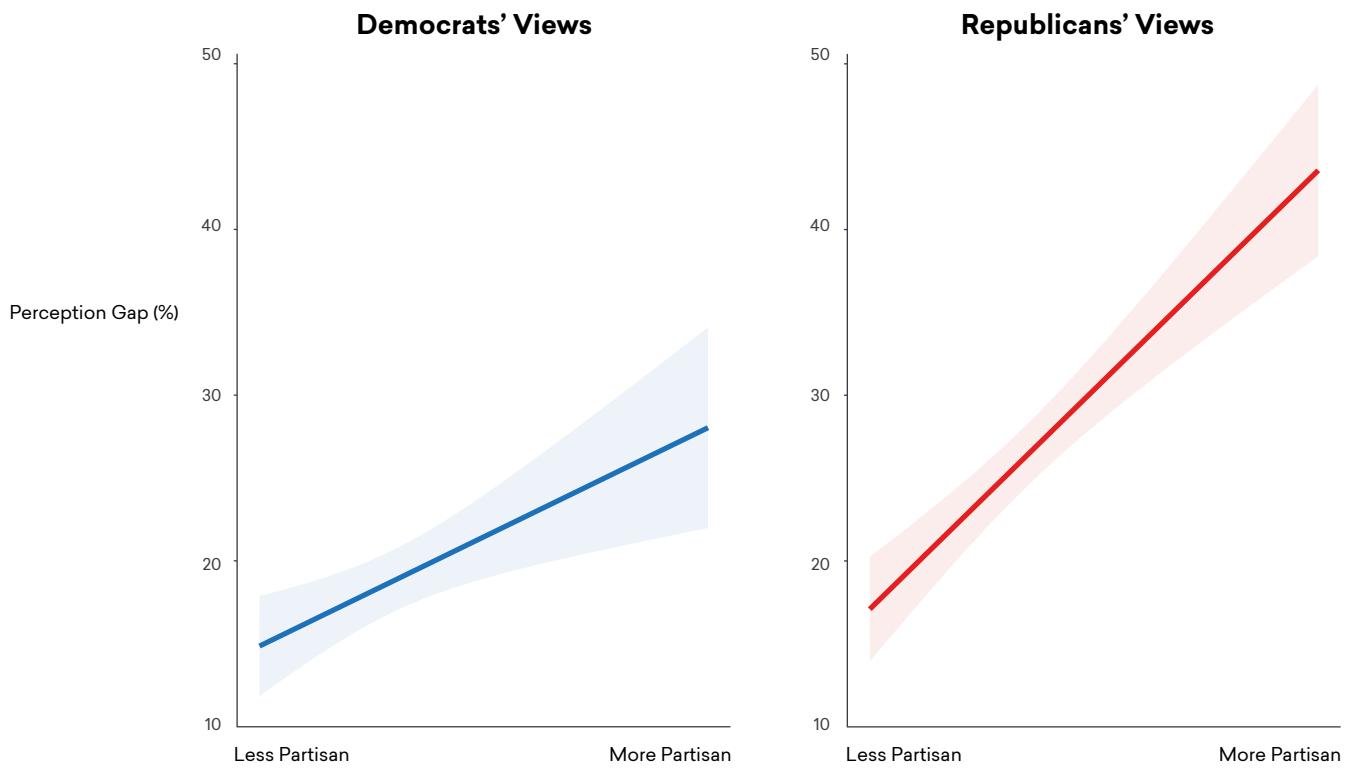
The fact that the Wings are more inaccurate than the Exhausted Majority suggests that there may be a positive correlation between the partisanship of one's own views and the inaccuracy of one's beliefs about one's opponents. To test this idea, we first calculated a "partisanship score" for Democrats and Republicans. To do this, we used the 7 items that participants had indicated their *own* agreement with, and coded each response as a 0 or a 1 depending on whether the response corresponded with the mainstream view or the partisan view, respectively. Thus a Republican who indicated agreement that "Racism still exists in America" would receive a 0 for this item; a Democrat who indicated agreement that "Most police are bad people" would receive a 1. We then took an average across the 7 items, yielding a partisanship score between 0 and 1 for each person, with 0 indicating no partisan views and 1 indicating completely partisan views. We then calculated the correlation between this partisanship score and the inaccuracy of people's second order beliefs.

The results showed that for both Democrats ($r = 0.10, p = .001$) and Republicans ($r = 0.24, p < .001$), people with more partisan political views are also more likely to hold inaccurate views of the other party¹⁷.

Figure 6

Partisanship and Misperception

The correlation between the partisanship of Democrats' and Republicans' views and their Perception Gap. Shaded area indicates standard error.



Source: More in Common (2019)

¹⁷ A similar result was obtained by van Boven, Judd, & Sherman (2012) and by Westfall, van Boven, Chambers, & Judd (2015)

Chapter

3

Media Consumption

As Americans' interactions with each other are increasingly mediated by online interactions – through social networks, messaging apps, email and other channels – our perceptions of each other are increasingly shaped by those interactions and by information obtained online. Public debate often focuses on the erosion of traditional media such as print newspapers since the 1990s¹⁸, but when we combine online and offline media sources, overall levels of consumption have significantly increased¹⁹. Changes in media consumption habits are playing a role in political polarization²⁰. Our findings provide insight into how these habits might be shaping Americans' perceptions of each other's beliefs.

To understand more about the role of media, we asked survey respondents to provide information about which types of news media they regularly consumed, thereby allowing us to test the correlations between people's media consumption habits and their Perception Gap. The study used a standard categorization of media content deployed across YouGov's research studies (see Methods for precise wording).

Table 6

Self-reported Consumption of Different News Sources by Party Affiliation

Percentages indicate the total proportion of people, within each party affiliation, who selected that media source as a response to the following question: "Which of the following news sources (in any format, broadcast or online) have you used regularly in the past month for news about government and politics?" Participants could select as many as applied.

	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Sources such as Slate, Buzzfeed, Daily Kos, or Huffington Post	35%	14%	10%
Newspapers like The New York Times or the Washington Post	40%	18%	11%
MSNBC	32%	9%	7%
CNN	42%	18%	10%
FOX News Network	11%	22%	57%
ABC, CBS, NBC	53%	35%	32%
Local television news, radio, or newspapers in your area	52%	42%	56%
Newspapers like The Wall Street Journal, or the Washington Times	12%	9%	11%
Talk Radio programs like Rush Limbaugh or the Sean Hannity Show	2%	9%	29%
Breitbart News	1%	5%	14%
Sources such as the Drudge Report, Redstate.com, or HotAir.com	1%	8%	18%
Religious news sources like The Christian Post or the Christian News Network	3%	5%	8%
Social media sources like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat	43%	30%	38%
None of the above	9%	22%	7%

¹⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/01/circulation-and-revenue-fall-for-newspaper-industry/>

¹⁹ Richter, R. (2013). https://www.google.com/search?q=statistics+on+media+consumption&source=lnms&tbo=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjp592XhfbAhURRKwKHawSBLQQ_AUIDygC&biw=1339&bih=698#

²⁰ Faris et al., (2017) <https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2017/08/mediacloud>

The analysis here consisted of a series of regression models that examined the effect on the Perception Gap that was beyond the margin of error of each form of media consumption, controlling for income, education, age, gender, political ideology, and partisanship to ensure that any effects we observed stemmed directly from media consumption rather than from other differences. Thus, the results reflect the “additive effect” of each form of media consumption: the difference in the Perception Gap between those who *do not* consume each form of media relative to those who *do* consume it.

The results of this analysis are striking. Of the 13 forms of media consumption habits we surveyed, only one (network news) is associated with a lower Perception Gap. Several (CNN, MSNBC, certain religious news sources, the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Times) have no statistically significant effect, and the rest (9 in total) are positively associated with the Perception Gap.

For example, the Perception Gap of those who do not regularly consume Fox News is 20 percentage points. The additional Perception Gap of consuming Fox News is +4 percentage points—a proportional increase of 20 percent. This effect is even more pronounced for left-leaning sources like Slate, Buzzfeed, Daily Kos, and the Huffington Post, non-readers of which have an average Perception Gap of 20 percentage points, but whose readers can expect an additional Perception Gap of +8: a proportional increase of 40 percent.

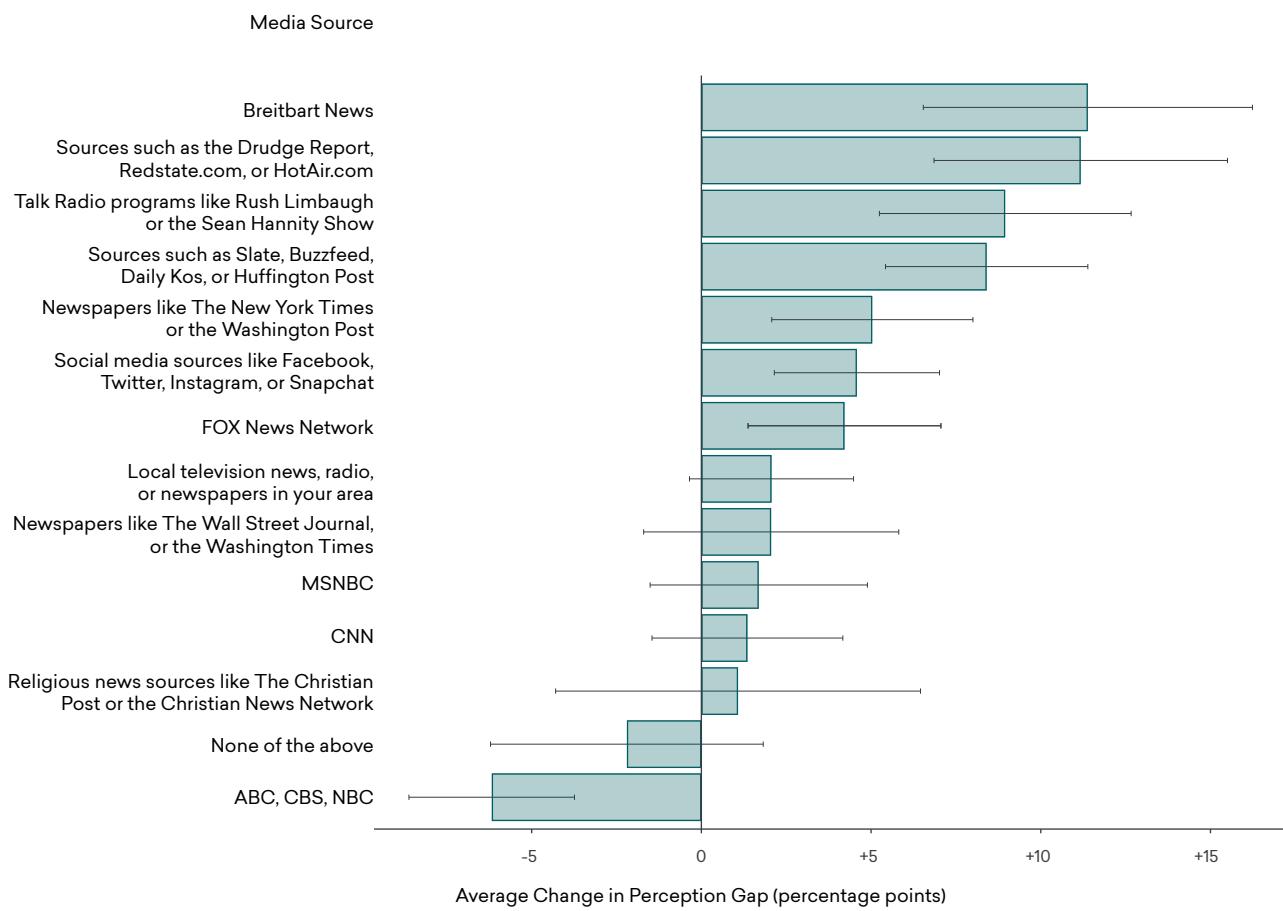
But the media sources consistently associated with the largest Perception Gap are the right-leaning sources Breitbart News, the Drudge Report, and conservative talk radio (e.g., Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity). While, again, people who do not consume these forms of media can expect an average Perception Gap of about 20 percentage points, those who *do* consume them show an average of +11, +11, and +9 percentage point increase in the Perception Gap, respectively: roughly equivalent to a 50 percent proportional increase.

On the other hand, the media associated with a clear reduction in Perception Gaps are the television network channels ABC, CBS and NBC. Consumers of content from these sources are on average 6 percentage points more accurate in their perceptions than other Americans. Aside from this, ironically the only other type of media consumption associated with more accuracy is “None of the above.” People who consume no media are, on average, 2 percentage points *more* accurate than those who do. (It should be noted, though, that this should be interpreted with caution since the number is within the margin of error of 0).

Figure 7

Media and the Widening Perception Gap

The association between the Perception Gap and various forms of media consumption. The x-axis reflects the difference in the inaccuracy scores between people who *do* consume that form of media and those who do not. Error bars = 95% confidence interval.



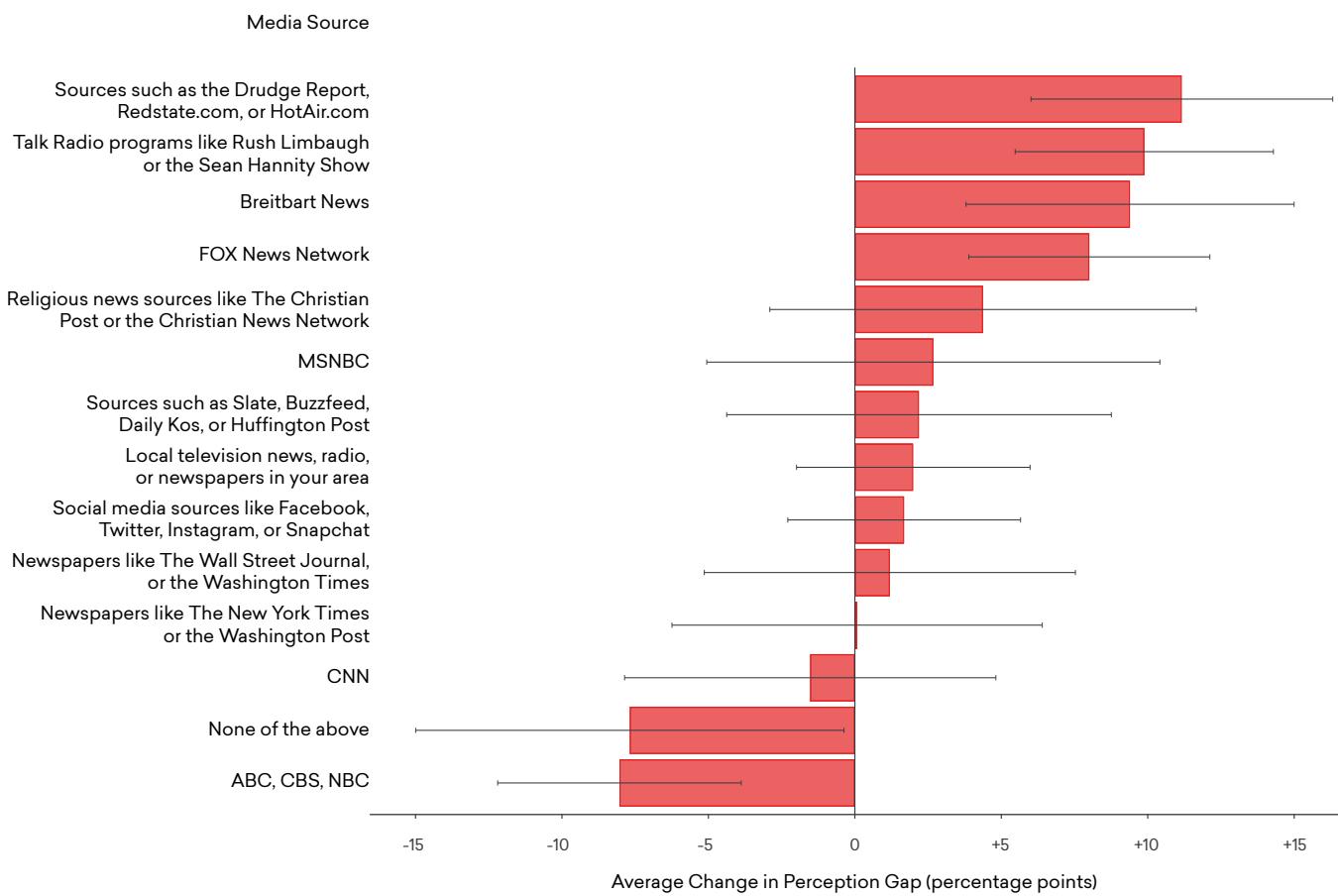
Source: More in Common (2019)

Media Consumption by Party

A more complete picture of the relationship between media consumption and the Perception Gap is generated by examining consumption of media sources according to partisan identity. For example, one might expect that Democrats who regularly consume conservative media would have a better understanding of the views of their Republican counterparts than those who do not. For this reason, we also examined the effect of each source on Republicans and Democrats separately.

Figure 8 — Republicans, Misperceptions, and the Media

The association between various forms of media consumption and Republicans' Perception Gap. Error bars = 95% confidence interval.

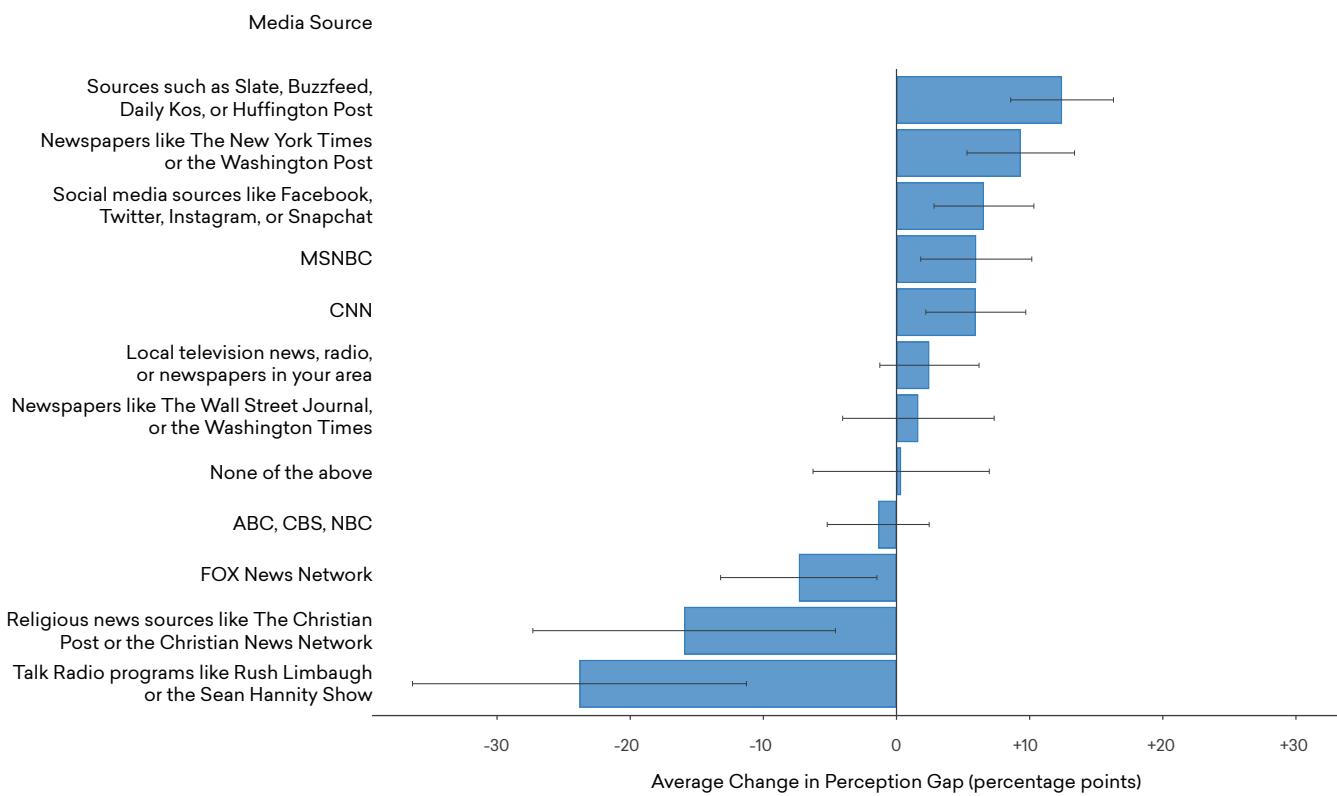


Source: More in Common (2019)

Figure 9

Democrats, Misperceptions, and the Media

The association between various forms of media consumption and Democrats' Perception Gap. Error bars = 95% confidence interval.



Source: More in Common (2019)

The results largely confirm what would be expected: while consumption of media sources that are in line with one's partisan identity is correlated with a larger Perception Gap, consumption of media across ideological boundaries appears to reduce it. This is predominantly the case among Democrats, for whom consumption of various right-leaning news sources like conservative talk radio and conservative religious media diminishes (and in some cases even reverses) the Perception Gap. By contrast, while consumption of left-leaning news sources such as Huffington Post does not exacerbate Republicans' Perception Gap, it does not reduce it in any statistically significant way.²¹

²¹ News sources with levels of consumption of 1% or less were omitted from Figures 8, 9

It is important to keep in mind that these analyses, due to their low sample size (not very many Democrats consume right-leaning media and vice versa), suffer from considerable statistical variance. Furthermore, because these results are completely correlational, they do not imply a causal relationship. We cannot determine whether consuming various forms of media leads people to have a wider Perception Gap, or if people who already have a large Perception Gap are attracted to various media sources. Caution should therefore be exercised in concluding that these findings are the result of causation rather than just correlation. In a deeply polarized environment, a range of different social and environmental factors have a compounding effect. For example, an individual might be consuming diverse sources of information because they are closely related to someone in their household with a different partisan attachment, and that relationship (rather than their media consumption habits) more than any other factor may reduce their Perception Gap. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that consumption of media sources that cut against one's own ideological bent tends to be associated with more accurate impressions of the other side, while sources that confirm one's pre-existing views are associated with less accurate impressions.

Frequency of News Consumption

Results of another analysis corroborate the notion that increased media consumption is associated with belief inaccuracy²². Participants were asked the following question related to the frequency of their consumption of various forms of news media:

*Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested.
Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs:*

- Most of the time
- Some of the time
- Only now and then
- Hardly at all/Don't know

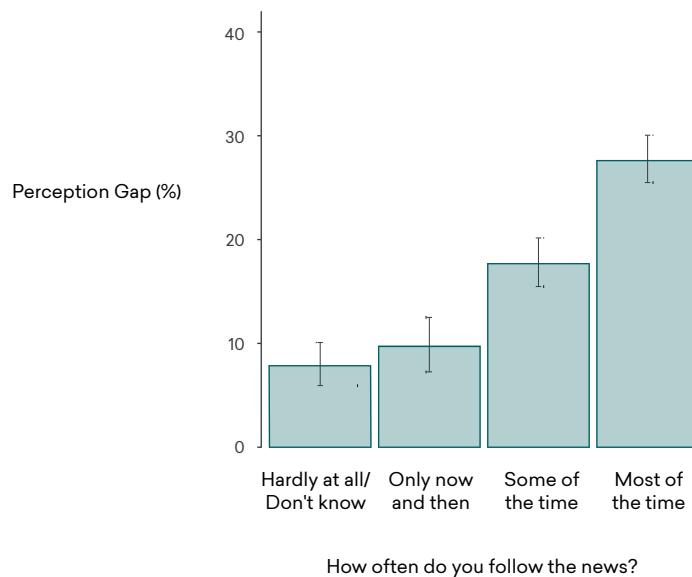
We then examined the relationship between people's response to this question and the Perception Gap, controlling for incidental demographics as above. The results show that with increased media consumption, the Perception Gap widens into a chasm: while those who "hardly" consume media are off in their perceptions by about 8 percentage points, and those who do so "only now and then" are off by about 10 percentage points, those who do so "some of the time" are off by 18 percentage points, and those who do so "most of the time" are off by a full 28 percentage points. This means that moving from consuming media "only now and then" to "most the time" is associated with a near-tripling of the Perception Gap. This effect is symmetrical regardless of people's position on the political spectrum.

²² see also: Marietta & Barker (2019)

Figure 10

Increased Media Consumption and the Perception Gap

Relationship between the Perception Gap and frequency with which people follow current events. Error bars = 95% confidence interval.



Source: More in Common (2019)

Posting on Social Media

Another way that people interact with the media is through posting their own content. With the advent of social media, laypeople have the opportunity to contribute to the political conversation in unprecedented ways. But while more people than ever are sharing their thoughts and opinions, it is not clear whether their views are based on accurate or inaccurate political perceptions. For this reason, we sought to examine whether the people who are actively posting on social media have a wider or narrower Perception Gap than those who are not. The question that we used to assess social media posting was:

Here is a list of activities that some people get a chance to participate in and others don't. Which of the following have you taken part in in the past year?

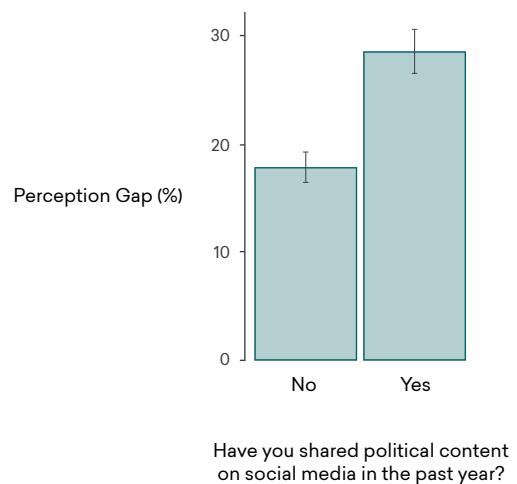
- Shared political content on social media

The results confirm the pattern of the findings listed above. While people who do not post on social media have an average Perception Gap of 18, those who do post on social media have an average Perception Gap of 29—a more than fifty percent increase.

Figure 11

Inaccurate Posters

The difference in the Perception Gap between those who do and do not post political content on social media. Error bars = 95% confidence interval.



Source: More in Common (2019)

Chapter

4

Education

Higher education has become increasingly important for success in America in recent years. Over the past three decades, the number of people aged 18 to 24 that were enrolled in college increased over 50 percent²³. Accordingly, it is instructive to determine the relationship between people's level of educational attainment and their understanding of other Americans' perspectives.

Table 7 Educational Attainment by Party

Highest education level obtained by Americans according to partisan identity

	Democrat	Republican
No HS	3%	4%
High school graduate	36%	41%
Some college	23%	19%
2-year	8%	10%
4-year	21%	18%
Post-grad	10%	8%

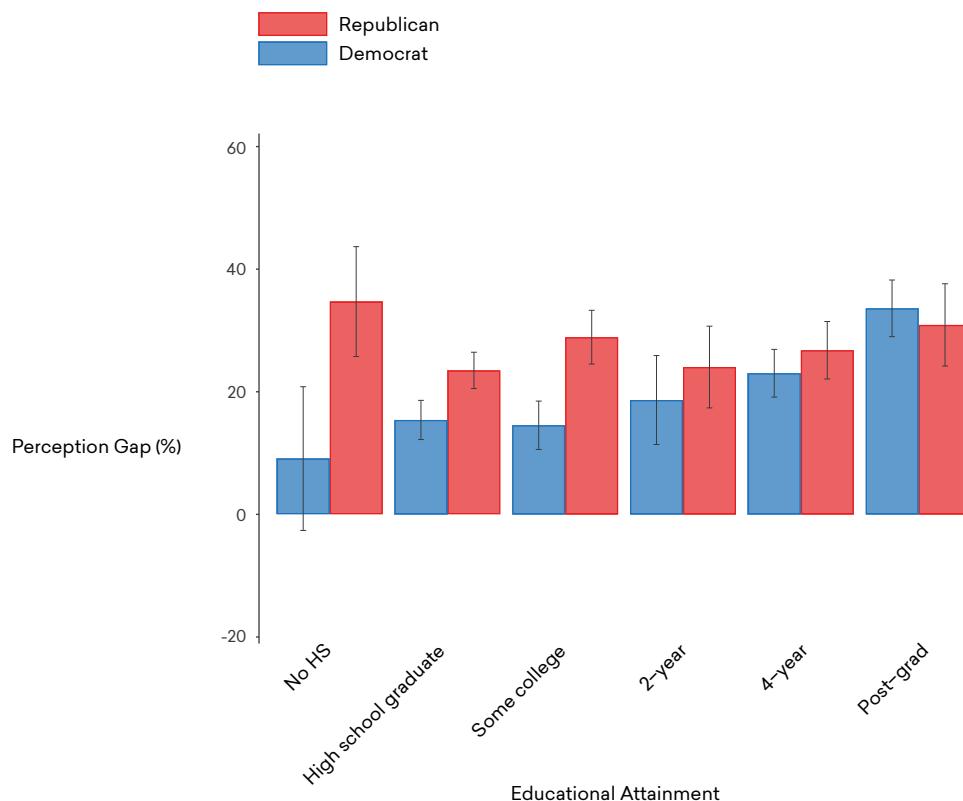
To answer this question, we first examined the Perception Gap for each level of education across both parties. The results show that the most inaccurate group are Republicans without a high school degree (with a Perception Gap of 35 percentage points). By contrast, the most *accurate* group are Democrats without a high school degree, who have an average Perception Gap of 9 percentage points.

²³ Cook (2014) <https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2014/09/22/is-the-college-admissions-bubble-about-to-burst>

Figure 12

Education and the Perception Gap

Average Perception Gap for Republicans and Democrats at each level of education. Error bars = 95% confidence interval.



Source: More in Common (2019)

A look at Figure 12 suggests another interesting trend: Democrats seem to become more inaccurate as they get more educated. To test this question, we examined the correlation between education²⁴ and the Perception Gap among both Democrats and Republicans. The results showed a significant positive correlation ($r = .19, p < .001$), suggesting that the more educated members of this party are, the less likely they are to understand Republicans. For example, by the time Democrats receive a postgraduate degree, they have an average Perception Gap of 34 percentage points. On average, each new educational attainment is associated with an increase in Democrats' Perception Gap of about 4 percentage points.

For Republicans, the relationship between education and inaccuracy is not statistically significant ($r = .04, p = .27$), suggesting that the association between education and inaccuracy here does not exceed that which might be observed from chance alone. While non-high-school educated Republicans have a Perception Gap of 35, those with advanced degrees have a Perception Gap of 31.

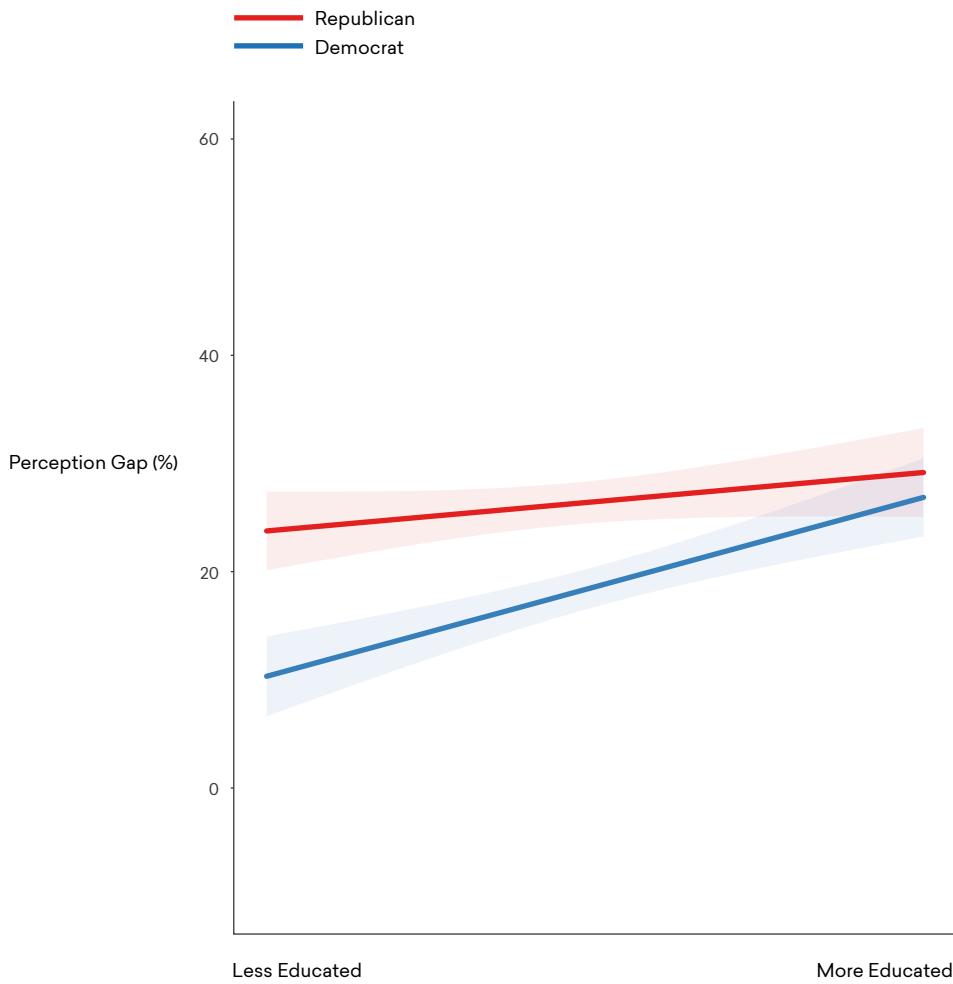
²⁴ For this analysis, education was coded as a continuous variable from 1 = "No High School Diploma" to 6 = "Post graduate degree"

While it may be tempting to compare the absolute difference in the Perception Gap between the two groups, this approach is of limited value because the two groups responded to different question sets. However, what is possible is to compare the effect of education on the overall inaccuracy within each group using a statistical “interaction” test, which tests whether the linear effect of education on inaccuracy is stronger for Democrats than Republicans. The results showed a statistically significant effect ($p = .001$), confirming that greater levels of education are indeed associated with more inaccuracy among Democrats than Republicans.

Figure 13

Educational Differences in Parties' Misperceptions

The relationship between education and belief inaccuracy, broken down by party. Democrats show a stronger positive relationship between education and inaccuracy than Republicans. Colored lines indicate regression line; shaded areas indicate standard error.



Source: More in Common (2019)

A Selection Effect?

There are several ways to interpret these results which we examined through further analysis. One possible explanation is a “selection” effect, where the relationship between inaccuracy and education is the result of the fact that people who obtain higher education degrees are more inaccurate to begin with. If this were the case, then higher education would not actually be *causing* greater inaccuracy; instead, it would merely be *revealing* greater inaccuracy among that subset of people who pursue higher education. For example, maybe people who are liberal to begin with tend to pursue higher education. Or maybe people with greater wealth, who are more socially isolated from other Americans, tend to pursue higher education.

Results showed, however, that the effect of education on inaccuracy for Democrats remained significant even when controlling for these factors, as well as gender and age ($p = .019$). We addressed this question by controlling for these factors in a regression analysis. If family income or political predilections were entirely responsible for this relationship, then the association between education and inaccuracy would be reduced when controlling for them in the model. Given that the association remained robust, this lends more weight to the proposition that demographic factors like income or political ideology are not the only things responsible for the relationship between education and misperceptions among Democrats. Put simply, the evidence indicates that pursuing higher education itself, over and above demographic factors, plays a role in distorting Democrats’ understanding of Republicans.

Friendship Diversity

Another possible explanation we explored is a “socialization” effect. This explanation focuses on how people’s social environments are influenced by their level of educational attainment. People who achieve an undergraduate or postgraduate university education tend to mix with others like them, perhaps reflecting their workplace, neighborhood or social circles. If the “socialization” explanation is correct, then better educated Democrats should report having fewer and fewer friends with different political views, but the same will not hold true of Republicans.

To test this hypothesis, we reviewed participants’ responses to this question:

What proportion of your friends have similar political views as you?

- Almost none
- Less than half
- About half
- More than half
- Almost all

The results suggest that Democrats’ friend circles do indeed become less politically diverse as they become more educated. With every additional level of education, Democrats become 11 percent more likely to say that “More than half” or “Almost all” of their friends have the same views that they do ($p = .024$). The same is not true of Republicans, who only become 3 percent more likely to say the same thing—an effect that is within the margin of error ($p = .53$). Furthermore, the proportion of Democrats with at least a four-year degree who say that “almost all” of their friends share their political views is almost 50% greater than the proportion of Republicans with the same educational attainment (38 percent versus 26 percent).

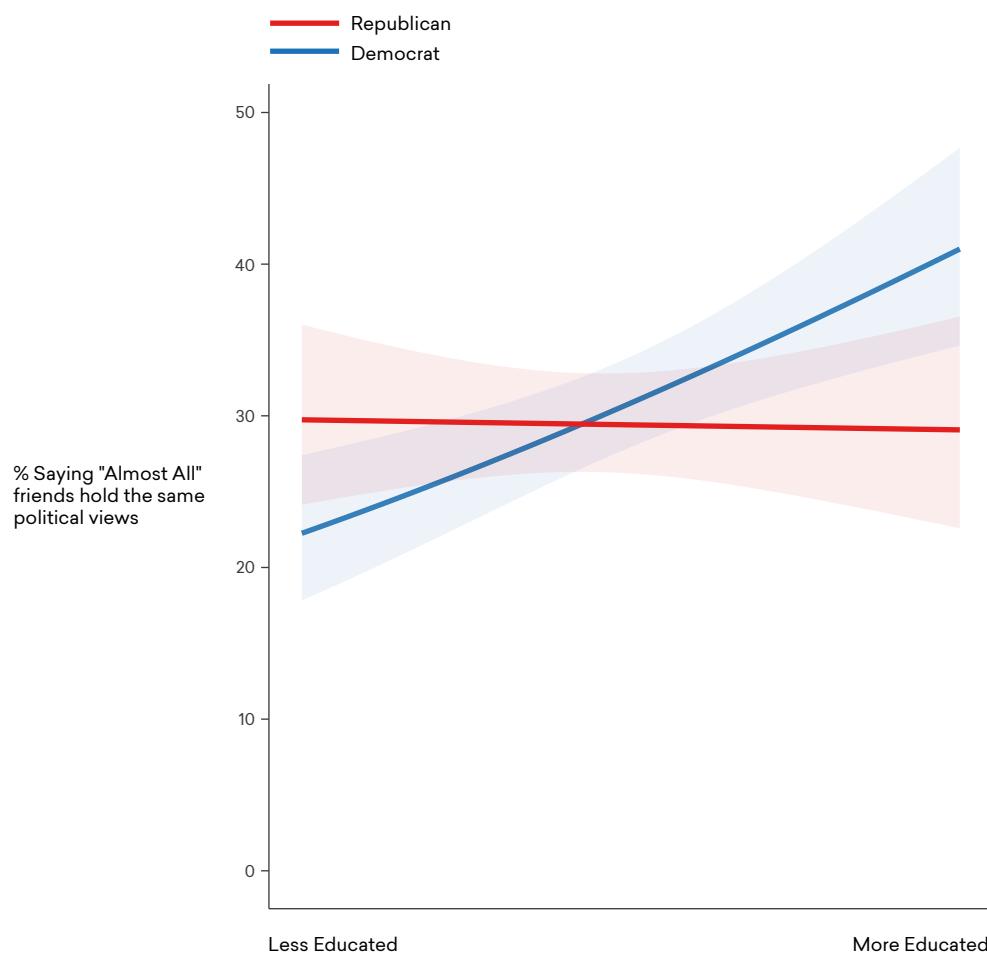
Additionally, the diversity of Democrats' friend groups, but not Republicans', is highly predictive of their Perception Gap. The more politically homogeneous Democrats' friend circles are, the more distorted their perception of Republicans. For example, Democrats who say that "Almost None" or "Less than Half" of their friends share their political views have an average Perception Gap of 18 percentage points, while those who say that "Almost all" of their friends share their views have an average Perception Gap of 23 percentage points. Among Republicans, however, the difference in the Perception Gap between these different types of friend groups was less than 1 percentage point (26 and 27 percentage points, respectively).

In sum, this provides evidence that a significant reason for increasing levels of political inaccuracy among higher educated Democrats is that they have a less politically diverse group of friends and acquaintances.

Figure 14

More knowledge, fewer politically diverse friends

The relationship between education and the political diversity of people's friends among Democrats and Republicans. As Democrats become more educated, their friend groups become less politically diverse. The same is not true of Republicans. Shaded areas indicate standard error.



Chapter

5

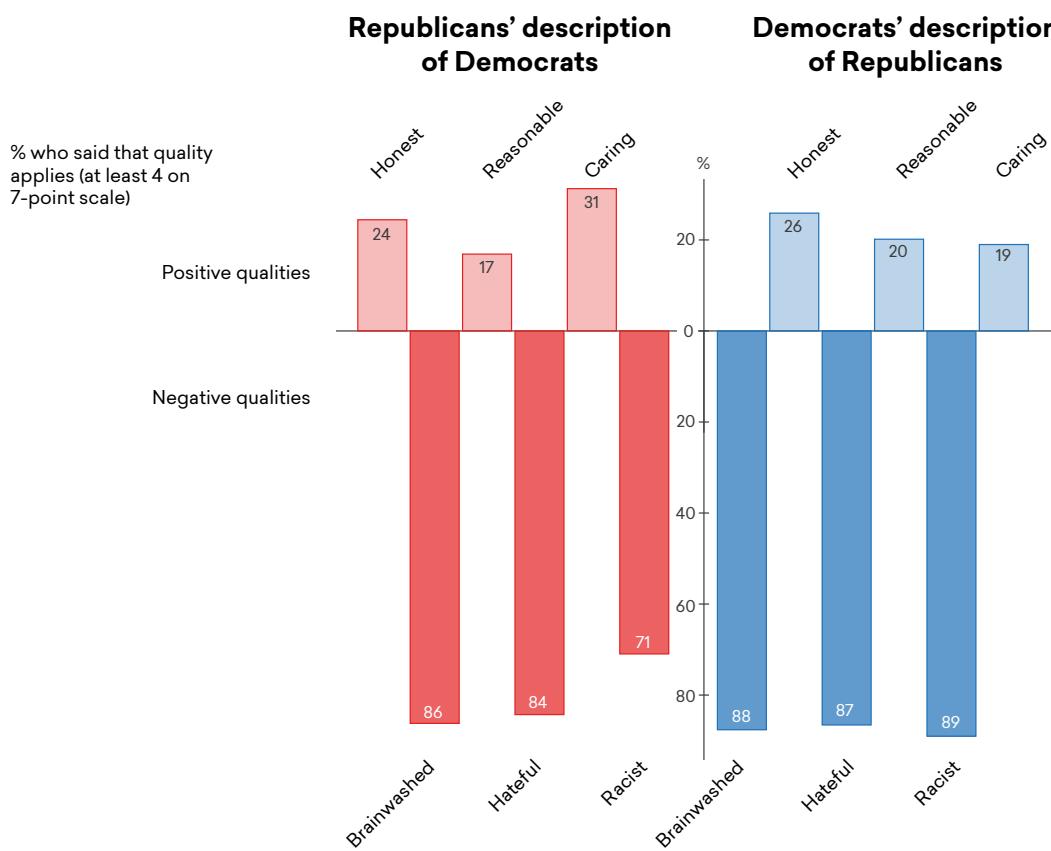
Character Judgments

Perceptions of the views of political opponents are associated with judgments about those opponents' character. Recent research has shown that people of opposing parties are increasingly viewing the other side of being not just mistaken in their policy views, but ignorant or even malicious²⁵. For example, more Americans than ever are averse to the idea of their son or daughter marrying someone of the opposite party²⁶. To test whether beliefs about others' character is related to misperceptions about their views, we asked people to rate the extent to which various qualities described affiliates of their own, and the opposite, political party. The responses demonstrated an important dimension of polarization: political opponents are not just perceived as wrong, but also as of bad intent.

Figure 15 provides insight into the extent of tribalism between Democrats and Republicans. The two sides are almost identical in the very high negative qualities which they attribute to each other. More than 80 percent of both Democrats and Republicans say their opponents are "brainwashed" and "hateful". About 90 percent of Democrats say Republicans are "racist", and 71 percent of Republicans say the same about Democrats. Less than one in four people in either party ascribe positive qualities to those who hold opposing partisan identities to their own.

Figure 15 — Judging One's Opponents

The proportion of Democrats and Republicans who ascribe various qualities to their political opponents. Responses were obtained on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely); pictured here: respondents who indicated a 4 or higher.



Source: More in Common (2019)

²⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/22/key-facts-partisanship/>

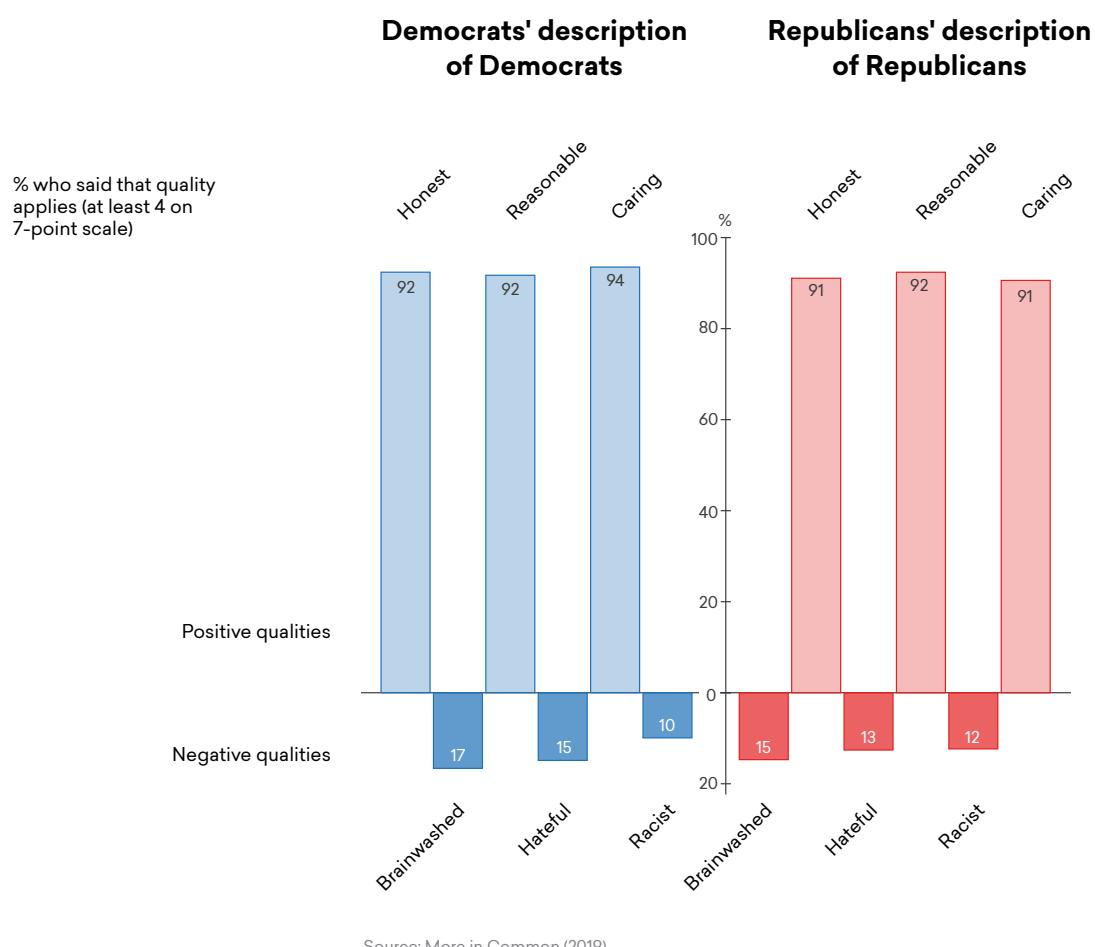
²⁶ <https://www.voanews.com/a/mixed-political-marriages-an-issue-on-rise/3705468.html>

We can also look at the degree to which people ascribe negative qualities to members of their *own* party. Overall, over 90 percent of people ascribe to their own party positive qualities like being caring, honest, and reasonable. Unsurprisingly, they rarely rate their fellow partisans as brainwashed, hateful, or racist (all less than 15 percent).

Figure 16

Judging One's Own

The proportion of Democrats and Republicans who ascribe various qualities to members of their own party. Responses were obtained on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely); pictured here: respondents who indicated a 4 or higher.

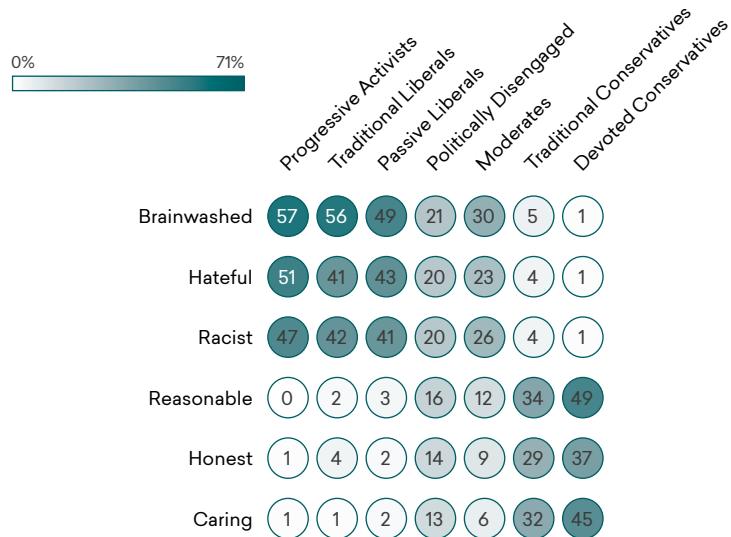


Similarly, we find evidence of tribalism in the positive views that individuals hold concerning their own side. The most negative views are held by the two most partisan segments, the Progressive Activists (towards Republicans) and Devoted Conservatives (towards Democrats). Indeed, these two groups hold almost identically negative views about their political opponents. In contrast, the Politically Disengaged and Moderates hold similar views about both sides, with slightly more negative views of Republicans among Moderates and of Democrats among the Politically Disengaged.

Table 8

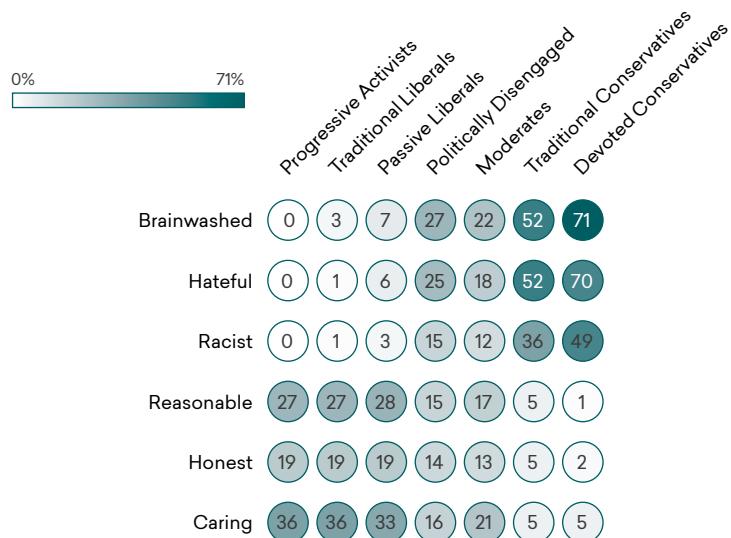
Judging Republicans

Proportion of each population segment that believes the quality “strongly applies” (7 on a 7-point scale) to Republicans.

**Table 9**

Judging Democrats

Proportion of each population segment that believes the quality “strongly applies” to Democrats.



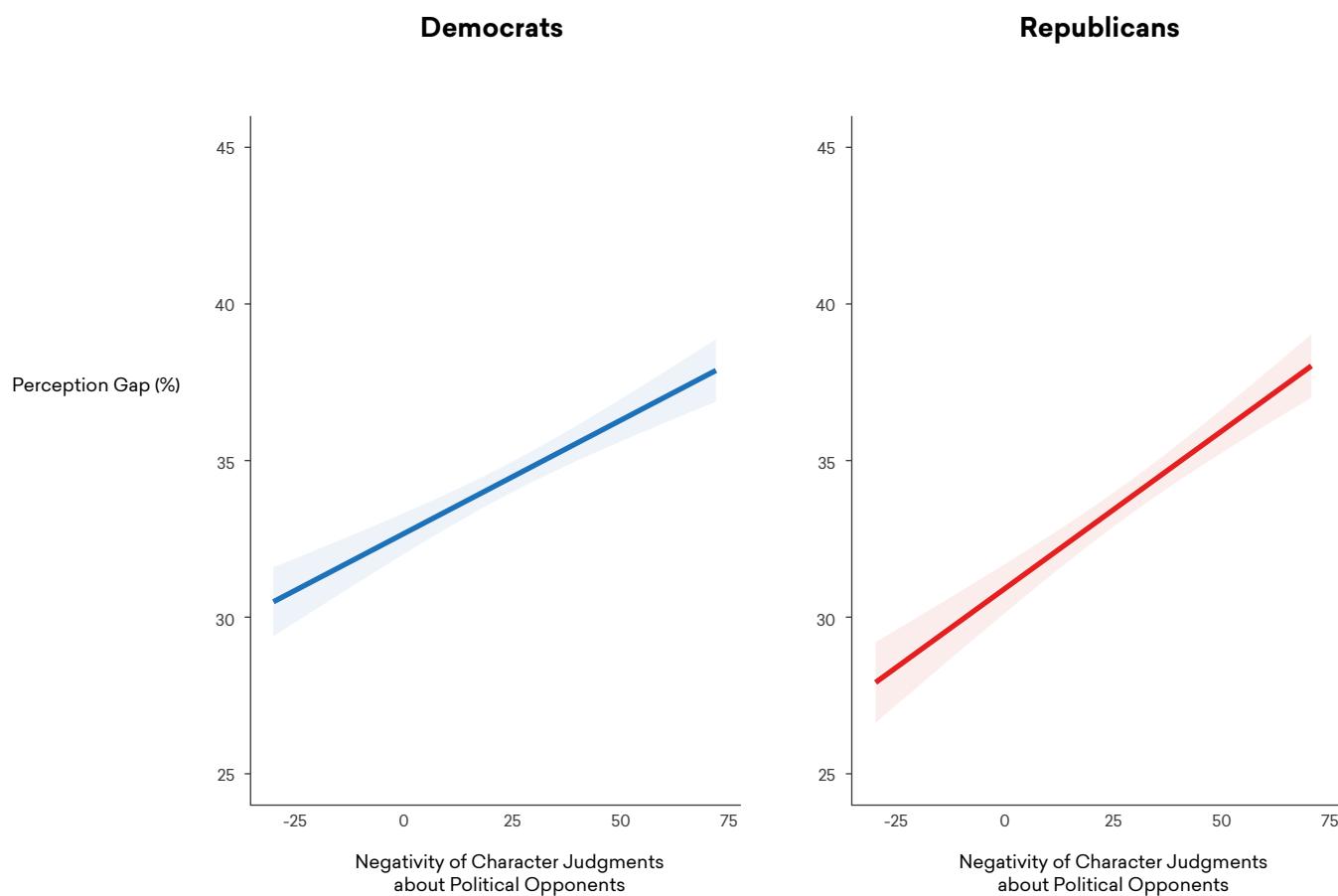
A further level of analysis was undertaken in order to better understand the relationship between negative character assessments of opponents and the Perception Gap. First, a Negativity Score was calculated for each person by reverse-coding the positive items and then averaging across the six character qualities. Each person's negativity score reflects the average amount of negative qualities that they ascribed to members of the opposite political group. Second, we examined the correlation between each person's Negativity Score and their Perception Gap.

This analysis confirmed a strong relationship between seeing one's political opponents as bad people and exaggerating the extremism of their views. Inaccurate second-order beliefs correlated with the negativity of character judgments for both political parties (Democrats: $r = .19, p < .001$; Republicans: $r = .36, p < .001$). In other words, the more extreme people consider the views of the other side, the more negative qualities they attribute to them.

Figure 17

Perception Gap and Negative Character Judgments

Relationship between Democrats' and Republicans' Perception Gap and the overall negativity of their character judgments of the other side. Shaded areas indicate standard error.



It is unclear whether people exaggerate the views of their opponents because they believe they are of bad character, or believe they are of bad character because they exaggerate their views. Most likely, the two components—high Perception Gap and ascriptions of negative personal qualities—go hand in hand as part of a dynamic of negative partisanship²⁷, whereby people define themselves in opposition to their political opponents, and see politics as a zero-sum game with winners and losers. It is possible that if people realize that the viewpoints of their opponents are not as extreme as they imagine, they may subsequently begin to also see them as more reasonable. More in Common hopes to test interventions in the future that can help answer this question, as part of our efforts to counter America's deepening polarization.

Conclusions

The results of this study have important implications for understanding polarization in the United States today.

1. Americans are less divided than they have come to believe. While there are profound divisions across the fault lines of race, geography, education, class and values today, this report highlights an opportunity to build bridges, because *Americans are less divided than they think*. In many cases, including on issues of immigration, racism, perceptions of law enforcement, and American pride, the number of people on the other side of the political fence holding extreme views is about *half* the number their opponents suspect.

This is good news for those under the impression that the overwhelming majority of their opponents subscribe to views they deem abhorrent. It is good news because it suggests that their fight may not be against other Americans, but rather against the systems perpetuating policies that cut against the will of the majority. Instead of hating and fearing each other, Americans could realize that many more people on the other side of the aisle hold the same views that they do.

2. Loud voices on the Wings may exacerbate the Perception Gap. While misperceptions come from a variety of sources²⁸, one important driver of this is likely a phenomenon outlined in *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape*, which shows that the views of those most highly engaged people are much further from the mainstream than those of most of their fellow citizens. The report found that a majority of Americans (67 percent) fall in the “Exhausted Majority”, a group of people far more flexible in their views than their more extreme counterparts (the Wings). Because members of the Wings are more active and involved in the political process, it can lead to the impression that they reflect the views of most supporters of their party, when in fact they only comprise a minority. This contributes to misperceptions for those on the other side of the political fence.

3. Increased political engagement among Americans is consistently correlated with a larger Perception Gap. Remarkably, the lowest Perception Gap is found among the Politically Disengaged, the group in the Hidden Tribes analysis that is least engaged in politics (through their media consumption habits and their public participation). Their Perception Gap is just 10 percentage points, and they have the most accurate views of both Republicans and Democrats. By contrast, the most highly engaged, active and educated people are least accurate in their views.

This finding also speaks against a possible alternative explanation for the results of the study: namely, that the Perception Gap is the result of mere “innumeracy”—that is, difficulty in estimating actual percentages of people who hold various views. If the results of the survey were the effect of innumeracy, we would expect the least-educated group to have the widest Perception Gap. Instead, the opposite is the case.

4. Nevertheless, some Americans hold deeply partisan views. While we find that fewer Americans hold extreme views than their opponents believe, this is *not* to minimize the (in some cases quite considerable) percentage of Americans who *do* hold views that are not mainstream. For example, 21 percent of Republicans do not accept that racism still exists in America. While Democrats imagine that more than twice as many Republicans (49 percent) hold this view, it still is the case that one in five hold this view. In addition, 30 percent of Republicans do not accept the statement that many Muslims are good Americans. This translates to millions of Americans holding these views, even if they are a minority within their own partisan grouping.

²⁸ Many of these have been outlined in previous research (see Further Reading, p. 53)

We can also find deeply partisan views on some issues among non-trivial minorities of Democrats. For example, 29 percent believe that the United States should have “completely open borders”, a view that most Americans would consider extreme given the realities of national security, sovereignty and economics. Similarly, 15 percent of Democrats believe most police are bad people—a view which does a disservice to the thousands of well-intentioned men and women who uphold this country’s laws. On both issues, while the number of Democrats that Republicans imagine to hold these views is inflated, a significant minority nevertheless still do.

The point of the study’s findings is not to deny that millions of Americans may hold views that a majority might consider extreme, prejudiced or potentially dangerous. Rather, the study highlights the fact that such views are, for the most part, held by *fewer* people than Americans tend to believe.

5. Perception Gaps do not exist on all issues. Another important caveat to this study is the fact that, on certain issues, the number of people holding views their opponents would find extreme is actually very *close* to what they estimate. For example, Democrats correctly estimate that one in two Republicans do not accept the statement that Donald Trump is a flawed person (raising questions about what sort of behavior would cause them to change their minds); similarly, they are correct in their estimation about the number of Republicans worried about climate change. Republicans are most accurate about the proportion of Democrats wanting to abolish ICE (60 percent estimated versus 47 percent actual). The degree of partisan distortion varies across issues and parties. Further research could broaden our comprehension of the issues where the Perception Gap is greater, as well as advance our understanding of what explains the difference.

6. Media consumption is associated with a wider Perception Gap. While a causal relationship between media consumption and the Perception Gap cannot be determined from this study, increased consumption of many types of media appears to be associated with inaccurate opinions about those on the other side of the political fence. The correlation between consumption of highly partisan, opinion-driven media and a larger Perception Gap suggests that media may play a significant role in increasing misunderstanding between Americans. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among conservative media such as Breitbart, Drudge and Redline, as well as talk radio, and on the left, among progressive news and commentary sources such as Huffington Post and Daily Kos. Overstating the extremism of political opponents is part of the business model of partisan media: feeding the culture of outrage validates partisan views and helps retain audience share²⁹.

The study also finds mitigating effects associated with consuming media content from opposing political perspectives. For instance, Perception Gaps appear to fall among Democrats who consume partisan Republican media content, such as conservative talk radio and religious media. Similarly, Perception Gaps fall among Republicans who consume network news from ABC, CBS and NBC³⁰. While it may be difficult to persuade people to change their consumption of media that reinforce their beliefs, this suggests that one practical strategy to reduce polarization is to encourage exposure to sources of information that take individuals outside of their partisan filter bubble.

²⁹ see Berry & Sobieraj (2013)

³⁰ As noted in the study, relatively small numbers of Democrats and Republicans consume media that cuts against their ideology, so in looking at these effects we must note the higher margin of error for these correlations.

7. Higher education may exacerbate the Perception Gap. The positive correlation between the Perception Gap and higher levels of education among Democrats highlights broader issues about the role that education plays in America. In particular, we find that, counterintuitively, the more credentialed Democratic supporters become through higher education, the *less* accurate their views become of Republicans. Furthermore, as our analysis showed, this is not merely a result of the fact that college attendees are just more liberal in the first place, or come from wealthier families, raising the question of the causal role that these institutions have in Americans' mutual understanding. It is not clear from this study whether the negative associations with higher education are the result of passive factors (such as reduced interaction with people from an ideologically diverse set of backgrounds) or active factors (such as adopting common assumptions about conservatives), although our analysis suggests that lack of friendship diversity among Democrats may be one contributor. Either way, these observations suggest that leaders in higher education should continue investigating how their institutions can play a positive role in this time of deepening polarization in American society.

8. Social psychology provides valuable insights into the factors driving polarization and disruption. To understand the forces shaping many of America's most divisive debates today, we need to understand the psychological and social dynamics of polarization and tribalism. Similar dynamics have played significant roles in past episodes in American history, but they are supercharged today, especially by social media and partisan news sources. These dynamics include:

- The 'echo chamber' effect of social and traditional media, which groups people into enclaves in which they are exposed to less diversity of viewpoints and are less likely to have their own views challenged.
- The observation of 'partisan sorting' driven by economic and cultural factors, which is the increasingly prevalent tendency for people with similar beliefs to congregate in geographically distinct areas,³¹ just as they congregate in similar digital spaces.
- The 'group polarization' effect found in many studies, in which people who engage only with like-minded people about an issue come to believe a more extreme version of what they did before.³²

The effect of these interconnected phenomena is to reinforce partisanship and isolate people from alternative views. This accelerates group polarization, distorts understanding of others and fuels the cycles of fear and outrage on social media.

This study is not the first to find evidence of a Perception Gap among Americans. This effect, which some other research has been described as "false polarization", has been documented since at least the 1990s, with subsequent research providing excellent insights into its causes and consequences. Indeed, much of the work we see here—including the potentially counterproductive relationship with news media—are confirmed in other research on the topic. We include a more comprehensive treatment of this past research in the Further Reading section.

Some additional relevant dynamics of social psychology are discussed in more detail in More in Common's 2018 paper on the psychology of populism³³, helping to explain why individuals with a stronger sense of partisan identity have a wider Perception Gap.

³¹ e.g., Mason (2015); Cho, Gimpel, Hui (2013)

³² Sunstein, C. R. (2019), *Conformity: The Power of Social Influences*, NYU Press

³³ Yudkin, D. (2018) *The Psychology of Authoritarian Populism: A Bird's Eye View*. More in Common, June 2018

9. There is a strong connection between perceptions of the extremism of others' views and perceptions of their character. The higher a person's Perception Gap, the more likely they are to believe that Americans with different views from their own are bad or evil. This in turn makes them more likely to see those Americans as a threat. This is significant because polarization has made party identity a much more central part of many Americans' personal identity. Many more people now perceive of their fellow Americans through the lens of whether they are Republicans or Democrats, and define themselves in opposition to their political opponents. This is reflected in the study's findings that around three-quarters of both Democrats and Republicans now ascribe negative personal characteristics to supporters of the other side (such as brainwashed, hateful and racist) while an even higher proportion ascribe positive qualities to their fellow partisans. More work is required to identify the most effective ways to address these dynamics of negative partisanship (such as through reducing their Perception Gaps and elevating other forms of shared identity that connect people across partisan divisions).

10. These findings underscore the need for wider efforts to address America's deepening polarization. Profound divisions are undermining our institutions and threatening faith in our democratic system. This study provides new insight into the extent of the misunderstanding of political opponents that deepen these divisions. Widening Perception Gaps reflect the evolution of a polarization ecosystem due to perverse incentives in social and traditional media, disproportionate levels of engagement and activism by the ideological fringes, and a political system which is rewarding actors who divide rather than unite Americans.

A healthy democracy will always contain some level of conflict as a necessary feature of the contest of ideas. But democracy also requires a sense of shared values and commitments, and a willingness to find common ground. This study suggests that there is more such territory than many might imagine. Most Americans are proud of their country; most desire a more fair and functional immigration system; most believe that issues of racism and sexism remain a problem today. These are just a few examples of the beliefs shared by Americans of seemingly different political persuasions. Yet often it appears as though the individuals most engaged in political issues are the least aware of these commonalities. For instance, it is striking that the Americans with the worst understanding of their opponents' views are those with the greatest media engagement and educational attainment. This should raise serious concerns about Americans' most cherished sources of information.

Reducing the Perception Gap first requires a greater level of awareness of the gap itself. The more Americans understand how often they exaggerate the extremism of their political opponents, the more they may question the way their opponents are depicted in day to day conversations and public debates. A key goal of this report is to demonstrate the reality of the Perception Gap so that more Americans can recognize and actively challenge the misguided assumptions that underpin tribalism. This is not easy. Many Democrats and Republicans feel that their fundamental values are endangered by the other, and those who challenge exaggerations about their opponents and seek common ground are inevitably accused of disloyalty to their tribe. There is a price for putting country ahead of party.

Addressing the Perception Gap also requires an even more difficult set of changes to the behaviors of institutions that contribute to a polarization ecosystem in the United States today. Our media should be contributing to our understanding of each other, rather than reinforcing false impressions. New technologies should be connecting us, rather than feeding us information through opaque algorithms that only deepen our isolation. America's education system should help forge a citizenry with a deeper knowledge and understanding of each other's values and beliefs. Yet there are powerful incentives against institutional change, even when people in those institutions recognize they may be contributing to the problem.

But perhaps the greatest change required is in American culture. Our public life has been overtaken by a culture that emphasizes loyalty to one's side and hostility to one's enemies. The mere prospect of listening to the other side – or questioning one's own – is perceived as weakness, and giving ground to the enemy. But addressing the Perception Gap requires that people on both sides see value in building bridges and engaging personally with those with a different political identity or views. This does not mean sacrificing one's values or deepest convictions, or adopting a toothless form of centrism that relinquishes progress for the sake of civility. But it does mean challenging the psychology of tribal warfare and being willing to engage those with whom we disagree. It also requires that we reimagine a bigger 'story of us'—a story of our country that prizes understanding over judgment, openness over dogma, and empathy over exclusion.

Further Reading

Several past studies provide useful parallel studies of perception gaps in the political sphere:

- In 1995, social psychologists observed that both pro-choice and pro-life advocates overestimated the degree to which they differed on issues related to abortion. The same was true for liberals and conservatives following a well-publicized racially charged 1987 incident at Howard Beach (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995).
- Follow-up work demonstrated similar effects to the 1995 study (e.g., Keltner & Robinson, 1997; Pronin, Puccio, & Ross 2002).
- Other research has documented similar findings within the conceptual framework of “false polarization.” Sherman, Nelson, and Ross (2003) showed that similar processes were at play in the debate about affirmative action.
- Levendusky and Malhotra (2013) suggested that the dynamics of political polarization may be self-fulfilling prophecies, whereby people’s beliefs of the extremity of the other side’s views causes them to be more entrenched in their own beliefs.
- Chambers, Baron, and Inman (2006) showed that this phenomenon was particularly exacerbated when it concerned values that were central to perceivers’ own ideology.
- Blatz and Mercier (2017) showed that political opponents overestimate the extremity of each others’ views but underestimate their level of certainty in holding those views.
- Comprehensively researched study by Westfall, van Boven, Chambers, and Judd (2015) used 30 years of national survey data from the American National Election Study to show that people perceive more polarization when they hold more extreme views themselves and when they estimate the attitudes of those being categorized as the “opposing group.” Levendusky and Malhotra (2016) confirmed these findings using a new set of issues (taxes, immigration, free trade, and public financing) and estimated with nationally representative data.
- Stern and Kleiman (2015) showed that promoting a “conflict mindset”, which involves the consideration of alternatives, is an effective means by which to minimize the Perception Gap. They further show that this mindset works by reducing the perceived ideological distance between themselves and out-group members (such as members of the opposite party).
- Ahler and Sood (2018) (also profiled in FiveThirtyEight: Bacon Jr., June 2018) examined misperceptions about party composition—that is, the percentage of people in each political party fitting various identities.

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Supporting Information

Here we provide further information about the use of the word “extreme” to characterize certain views from the Democrat and Republican Question Sets in this report. We recognize that not all who read this report will consider each of the opinions expressed by these questions to be extreme. For example, a socialist would undoubtedly not characterize the view that America should be a socialist country as extreme. Similarly, those who deny that climate change is an issue would not characterize the opinion that people should not be concerned about global warming as extreme. Instead, we use this word to designate views that people on the other side would view as extreme, with the aim of showing how people frequently overestimate the number of political opponents who hold such views.

To support the claim that each of the views we characterized as “extreme” would, in fact, be called extreme by the other side, below we provide information, for each claim, that that claim runs against the prevailing views of the opposite party. Much evidence is obtained from our own Hidden Tribes research (HT); where not available, we rely on external sources.

DEMOCRATS’ ESTIMATES OF REPUBLICAN VIEWS

- *“Properly controlled immigration can be good for America”*
 - 72% of Democrats believe that “America’s immigrant population is good for our country” (HT)
- *“Racism still exists in America”*
 - 95% of Democrats believe problems of racism are at least “somewhat serious” in America (HT).
- *“People are right to be concerned about how climate change might affect us”*
 - 67% of Democrats believe climate change should be a “top priority” (Pew)
- *“The government should do more to stop guns getting into the hands of bad people”*
 - 91% of Democrats think “we should make it harder for dangerous people to access guns” (HT)
- *“Donald Trump is a flawed person”*
 - 85% of Democrats disapprove of Trump (HT)
- *“Many Muslims are good Americans”*
 - 89% of Democrats believe “Muslims can be as loyal to America as anyone else” (HT)
- *“Sexism still exists in America”*
 - 88% of Democrats believe that problems of sexism are still at least “somewhat serious” in the US today. (HT).

REPUBLICANS’ ESTIMATES OF DEMOCRAT VIEWS

- *“The US should have completely open borders”*
 - 77% of Republicans support building a US border wall (HT)
- *“The US should abolish ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement)”*
 - 63% of Republicans say the federal government should be able to direct cities to enforce immigration laws (HT)

- “*Most police are bad people*” (disagree)
 - 82% of Republicans say that “police are mostly fair towards people of every race.” (HT)
- “*America should be a socialist country*”
 - 16% of Republicans hold a positive view of socialism (Gallup)
- “*Law abiding citizens should have the right to bear firearms*”
 - 8% of Republicans support repeal of the 2nd Amendment (YouGov)
- “*It is important that men are protected from false accusations pertaining to sexual assault*”
 - 78% of Republicans say people are “too sensitive” about things to do with sex and gender (HT)
- “*I am proud to be American though I acknowledge my country’s flaws*”
 - 94% of Republicans say that America is a “better country than most others” (HT).

Notes

**Hidden
Tribes**

