

# Perceiving Political Polarization in the United States: Party Identity Strength and Attitude Extremity Exacerbate the Perceived Partisan Divide

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## Abstract

An important component of political polarization in the United States is the degree to which ordinary people perceive political polarization. We used over 30 years of national survey data from the American National Election Study to examine how the public perceives political polarization between the Democratic and Republican parties and between Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. People in the United States consistently overestimate polarization between the attitudes of Democrats and Republicans. People who perceive the greatest political polarization are most likely to report having been politically active, including voting, trying to sway others' political beliefs, and making campaign contributions. We present a 3-factor framework to understand ordinary people's perceptions of political polarization. We suggest that people perceive greater political polarization when they (a) estimate the attitudes of those categorized as being in the "opposing group"; (b) identify strongly as either Democrat or Republican; and (c) hold relatively extreme partisan attitudes—particularly when those partisan attitudes align with their own partisan political identity. These patterns of polarization perception occur among both Democrats and Republicans.

## Keywords

attitudes, identities, political psychology, polarization, politics, American National Election Study

The current political polarization in the United States is alarmingly high. The division between congressional Democrats and Republicans has arguably caused the economy to stagnate, both in the United States and globally, and poses substantial barriers to enacting bipartisan policies that address the major economic, environmental, and social challenges of our time (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006; Nivola & Brady, 2008; Zurcher, 2013). Some social scientists have argued that polarization in Washington, DC, reflects and is caused by polarization among the American electorate (Abramowitz, 2013). Ordinary Democrats are believed to hold partisan attitudes that are qualitatively different from ordinary Republicans, as reflected in the oft-cited distinction between "blue states" and "red states." Liberal Democrats are believed to support expanded government and increased spending, whereas conservative Republicans support smaller government and reduced spending. Yet

other social scientists have argued that the degree of attitude polarization between Democrats and Republicans is exaggerated, both in the minds of the public and in the estimates of social scientists (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2010; Seyle & Newman, 2006).

What has been missing from much of the discourse on political polarization—both within academe and in the popular punditry—is a consideration of how everyday Americans perceive polarization between Democrats and Republicans. Psychologists, in particular, should appreciate the importance of examining perceptions of political polarization because one of psychological science's fundamental insights is that the perception of social reality

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has potent—if not prepotent—influence on cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Allport, 1954). An important set of questions for psychological scientists therefore concerns the nature of everyday Americans' perception of attitude polarization between Democrats and Republicans. Do Americans overestimate or underestimate political attitude polarization between Democrats and Republicans? If Democrats genuinely support government spending on services more than Republicans, do Americans accurately perceive the magnitude of the difference? Are Americans' perceptions of political polarization associated with voting, campaign contributions, and other forms of political action? How do Americans' own political attitudes and identities relate to their perceptions of political polarization?

We suggest that three psychological factors shape everyday Americans' perception of political polarization: (a) the categorization of people into distinct partisan groups of Democrats and Republicans that define "our side" and the "opposing side," with the opposing political group seen as more polarized than one's own; (b) the strength with which people identify as a Democrat or Republican, which heightens tendencies to differentiate Democrats from Republicans; and (c) the extremity of people's own attitudes on partisan issues, which causes people to project more extreme attitudes onto both Democrats and Republicans. These three factors—categorization, partisan identification strength, and attitude extremity—provide a novel framework for understanding Americans' perceptions of political polarization.

## American National Election Study

We used a comprehensive data set to examine predictions derived from the three-factor framework. The data include more than 20,000 responses to the American National Election Study (ANES), conducted from 1968 until 2008, regarding various political issues. The ANES is a nationally representative cross-sectional survey, repeated biennially. Psychologists have used the ANES to glean valuable insights about political psychology in the United States (a brief list of recent examples include Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013; Napier & Jost, 2008; Payne et al., 2010; Rabinowitz, Sears, Sidanius, & Krosnick, 2009; and Shoots-Reinhard, Petty, DeMarree, & Rucker, 2014). Although the ANES is a mainstay of political science research—akin to psychology's laboratory rats and university undergraduates—neither political scientists (for an exception, see Granberg & Brown, 1992) nor psychologists have used the ANES to examine psychological predictors of perceived political polarization.

Our analysis included 10 different issues that ANES respondents have considered over the years. The top

panel of Table 1 presents the full set of issues and the scale endpoints of each issue. The bottom panel of Table 1 presents the years in which each issue was measured and the sample size for each issue in each year. For example, respondents in 2004 read (for Issue G):

Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Other people feel that it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

Other topics include whether people feel there should be a government insurance plan, whether medical expenses should be paid by individuals, and whether defense spending should be greatly decreased or greatly increased. For each issue, the option at one end of the scale represents a stereotypic liberal response, whereas the option at the other end of the scale represents a stereotypic conservative response.

On each issue, respondents reported their own attitude and estimated the attitudes of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and, in presidential election years, the Democratic and Republican candidates. Considering the question about government spending on services, respondents first placed themselves on the provided scale and then indicated, separately, where they would place the Democratic and Republican parties on the same scale. In presidential election years, respondents also placed the two presidential candidates on the same scale. For ease of interpretation, we coded all responses such that  $-3$  (on the left side of 0) represented the most liberal attitude and  $+3$  (on the right side of 0) represented the most conservative attitude.

We calculated our key measures from these responses. For example, we calculated respondents' perceptions of political polarization between the parties and between the candidates by subtracting their estimates of Democrats' attitudes from their estimate of Republicans' attitudes. Positive numbers indicate that people estimate that Republicans hold more conservative attitudes than Democrats.

Extended details about the data, the specifics of model estimation, and the statistical support for our conclusions are contained in the Supplemental Material available online. These supplemental details are crucial to a full understanding of our results.

**Table 1.** Political Issues Used and Initial Number of Responses (Respondent–Issue Pairs) by Year and Issue

Designation	Political Issue	Liberal Response (–3)	Conservative Response (+3)
A	Rights of the accused	Protect rights of the accused	Stop crime regardless of rights of accused
B	School busing	Bus to achieve integration	Keep children in neighborhood schools
C	Defense spending	Greatly decrease defense spending	Greatly increase defense spending
D	Government health insurance	Government insurance plan	Private insurance plan
E	Guaranteed jobs and income	Government should see to job and good standard of living	Government should let each person get ahead on his or her own
F	Aid to minorities/Blacks	Government should help minority groups/Blacks	Minority groups/Blacks should help themselves
G	Government services/spending	Government should provide many more services: increase spending a lot	Government should provide many fewer services: reduce spending a lot
H	Urban unrest	Solve problems of poverty and unemployment	Use all available force
I	Cooperation with U.S.S.R.	Cooperate more/try to get along with Russia	Get much tougher/big mistake to try to get along with Russia
J	Women equal role	Women and men should have an equal role	Women's place is in the home

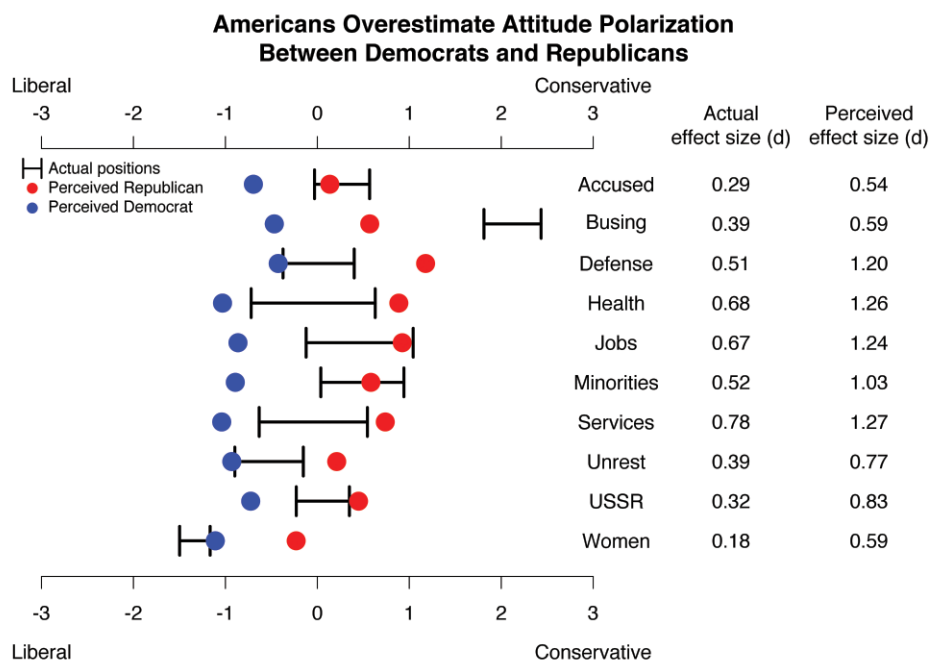
  

Issue										
Year	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1968								1,268		
1970	1,295			1,286		1,351		1,469		
1972	1,940	2,491		1,112	2,131	2,001		949		2,544
1974	1,298	1,380			1,310	1,344		1,287		1,461
1976	1,845	1,987		1,769	1,790	1,851		1,457		1,723
1978	1,934			1,884	1,820	2,037				2,155
1980		1,303	1,365		1,179	1,203			1,186	1,308
1982			1,125		1,210	1,195	1,119			1,302
1984		882	1,933	792	1,918	1,944	1,866		1,864	2,025
1986			2,061		1,009	1,950	2,068		1,956	
1988			1,870	1,823	1,843	1,878	1,828		1,703	1,908
1990			1,690		1,692	1,779	1,635			901
1992			2,325	2,140	2,353	2,229	2,284	1960		2,364
1994			1,642	1,637	1,652	1,654	1,567			1,650
1996			1,650	1,668	1,662	1,669	1,682			1,686
1998					1,122	1,155	1,254			1,264
2000			955	935	970	979	972			991
2002										
2004			1,196	1,112	1,187	1,172	1,194			1,203
2006										
2008			1,123	1,130	1,118	2,237	1,129			1,143

### Americans Overestimate Political Polarization Between Parties

Do ordinary Americans overestimate, underestimate, or accurately perceive political attitude polarization between Democrats and Republicans? There are several reasons why Americans might overestimate political polarization (Seyle & Newman, 2006). Chief among these reasons is perceptual categorization and its typical perceptual

consequences. Merely placing individuals into distinct groups of *Democrats* and *Republicans* can make those groups seem further apart (Corneille & Judd, 1999; Rutchick, Smyth, & Konrath, 2009; Tajfel, 1959; Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963), just as categorizing purplish colors into *blue* and *red* makes those colors seem more different than if they were not so categorized (Downing, Judd, & Brauer, 1992; Roberson, Davidoff, Davies, & Shapiro, 2004). Mere categorization can therefore cause people to



**Fig. 1.** Perceived and actual attitudes of Democrats and Republicans across 10 issues. Blue circles indicate perceived Democrat positions; red circles indicate perceived Republican positions; and black lines represent actual positions of both parties, with actual mean Democrat attitude always on the left (liberal) side and actual mean Republican attitude always on the right (conservative) side. The distance between black lines is less than the distance between blue and red circles, indicating that respondents overestimated political polarization. On every issue, the effect size of the perceived difference (computed as Cohen's *d*) is larger than the effect size of the actual difference, often by a factor of two.

overestimate political polarization between Democrats and Republicans.

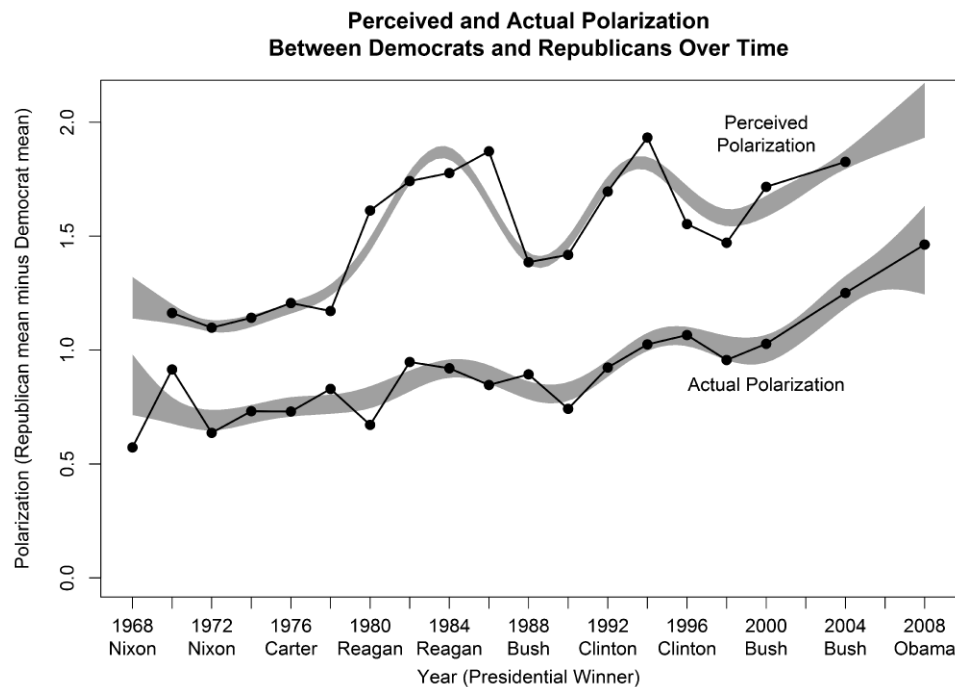
Over the years, several studies have demonstrated instances of polarization overestimation. During the Vietnam War, prowar "hawk" and antiwar "dove" students at the University of Oregon estimated the attitudes of hawks and doves to be further apart than they actually were (Dawes, Singer, & Lemons, 1972). Partisans on college campuses and from convenience community samples have overestimated the differences between partisans on topics of abortion (Chambers, Baron, & Inman, 2006; Chambers & Melnyk, 2006; Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995), affirmative action (Sherman, Nelson, & Ross, 2003), the potential revision of the traditional literary canon in English departments (Robinson & Keltner, 1996), and even partisan differences in moral foundations (Graham, Nosek, & Haidt, 2012).

Our analysis of the ANES confirms that Americans have, in fact, overestimated political polarization between attitudes of Democrats and Republicans and that they have overestimated polarization across issues and across four decades. Figure 1 presents the actual and estimated levels of polarization for each of the 10 issues included in the ANES, collapsing across all years. For each issue, the actual attitude polarization is calculated as the difference

between the average attitude of respondents who self-identified as a Democrat (on the left) and the average attitude of respondents who self-identified as a Republican (on the right).<sup>1</sup> The estimated attitude polarization is the difference between the average of respondents' estimates of Democrats' attitudes and their estimates of Republicans' attitudes. The figure also displays the effect size (Cohen's *d*) for actual polarization and perceived polarization on each issue. Although actual polarization effects are of medium size on most issues, perceived polarization effects are large on all issues and typically exceed actual polarization by a factor of two.

That Americans overestimate political polarization naturally raises the question of whether polarization has increased over the four decades represented in the ANES. There is mounting evidence that political polarization in the United States has increased (Abramowitz, 2013; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Dimock, Doherty, Kiley, & Oates, 2014; McCarty et al., 2006). If actual polarization has increased over time, it might be that the overestimation of polarization has decreased over time.

When interpreting analyses of polarization over time, two cautions must be borne in mind. First, changes over time might partially reflect changes in issues: questions about rights of the accused, school busing, and urban



**Fig. 2.** Perceived and actual polarization between Democrats and Republicans, computed as the mean Republican attitude minus the mean Democrat attitude, plotted over time. The dots are simple means across all respondents (for perceived polarization) or across all non-Independents (for actual polarization). There is no perceived polarization dot for 2008 because those measures were not collected in that cycle. The shaded smoothed lines represent plus or minus two standard errors from nonparametric regression fits (penalized cubic splines). Both actual polarization and perceived polarization between Democrats and Republicans have increased over time, and the difference between them has remained approximately constant.

unrest were asked only in the 1970s; questions about defense spending and government services were not asked until the early 1980s. Second, and potentially of more consequence, because the ANES is a cross-sectional survey and our analysis compares self-identified Democrats and Republicans, we cannot know whether changes over time reflect changes in individuals' attitudes (e.g., particular Democrats becoming more liberal) or changes in the composition of groups (e.g., more liberal people joining the Democratic Party). Properly accounting for this "party sorting" is among the most daunting challenges facing analyses of polarization over time (Fiorina et al., 2010; Gelman, 2009; Levendusky, 2009).

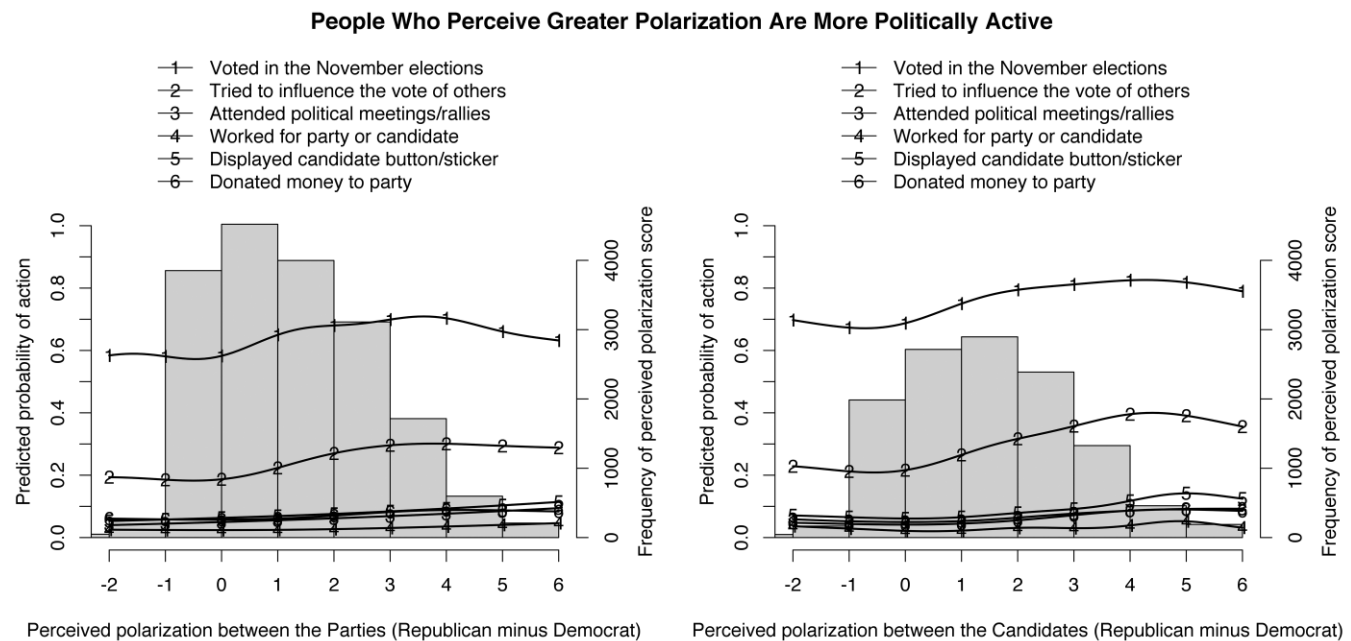
Bearing these cautions in mind (if not throwing caution to the wind), Figure 2 suggests that both actual and perceived polarization have increased from 1968 to 2008, and both have nearly doubled during that time. Because actual and perceived polarization have both increased, the overestimation of polarization has remained relatively stable. The continued overestimation of political polarization even as actual polarization has increased cries out for an explanation of who is most likely to overestimate political polarization.

## Perceived Polarization Predicts Political Actions

Adding to the urgency of understanding Americans' overestimation of political polarization is the fact that perceived polarization predicts political actions. People who perceive greater polarization between Democrats and Republicans and between Democratic and Republican presidential candidates are more likely to report engaging in various forms of political action, including voting, trying (legally) to influence others' votes, attending political meetings or rallies, working for a party or candidate, displaying buttons or stickers, and donating money to a party or candidate. We examined these six different political actions, predicting them from two measures of perceived polarization: people's perception of polarization between Democrats and Republicans, as described in the preceding section, and people's perception of polarization between Democratic and Republican presidential candidates (i.e., perceived Republican candidate stance minus perceived Democratic candidate stance).

Each measure of perceived polarization, aggregating across issues, independently predicted all of the political





**Fig. 3.** Probabilities of six political actions (left y-axis) as a function of perceived polarization between Democrats and Republicans (left panel) and between Democrat and Republican presidential candidates (right panel), independent of the effects of strength of party identification, direction of own attitude, extremity of own attitude, and demographic variables. The probabilities are derived from generalized additive models fit to each action with smooth functions for perceived polarization. Background histograms display the frequency of respondents at each level of perceived polarization (right y-axis).

actions.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that these effects were independent of people's own partisan identification and of the extremity of their partisan attitudes. The more people perceive the parties as polarized, the more likely they are to engage in political action (Fig. 3, left panel). And the more people perceive the presidential candidates as polarized, the more likely they are to engage in political action (Fig. 3, right panel).

We suspect that the associations between perceived polarization and political actions arise from the conflict-laden nature of politics: Only one party's candidate becomes president; only one party can hold a majority in each congressional chamber; and government services are either increased or not. Given the conflict between partisan groups, those who perceive greater polarization may feel a greater need to support their own political group (Asch, 1952; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Prentice & Miller, 1996) and to take defensive action to combat the opposing group (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). Indeed, politicians from one group often inflate the threat from the other group in an effort to "rally the base." For example, during the terms of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the parties of each president fanned the flames of threatened impeachment: Republicans suggested that Democrats would impeach President Bush for Iraq-related war crimes, and Democrats suggested Republicans would impeach President Obama for abuse

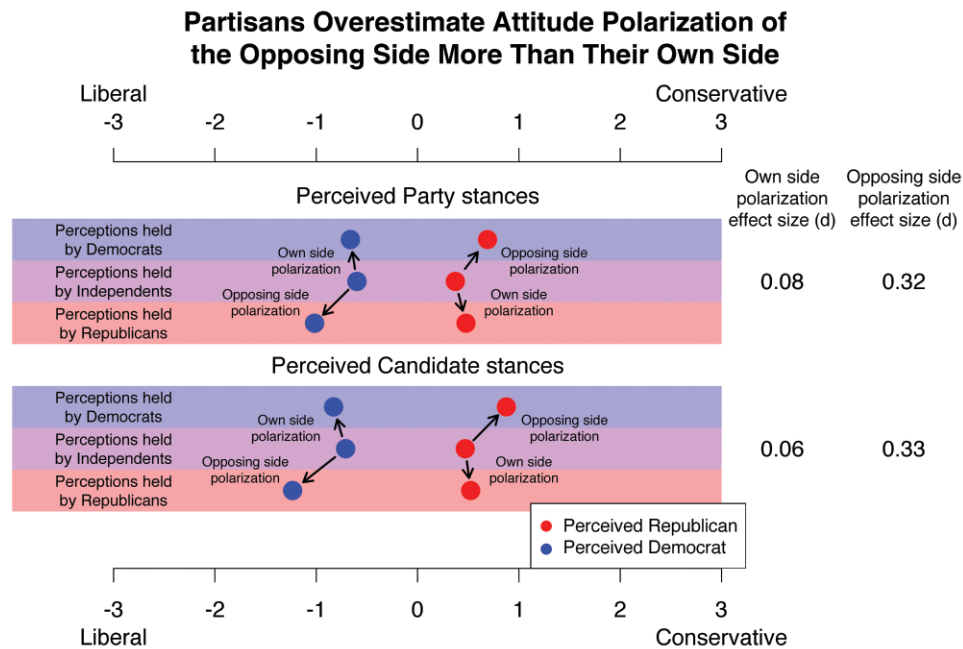
of executive orders on immigration (FiveThirtyEight, 2014). Although the ANES data obviously cannot resolve the causal relations between perceived polarization and political actions, these findings sound a call for future research on the consequences of perceived political polarization. That those who perceive greater polarization are more politically active naturally raises the question: Who is more inclined to see polarization?

### Who Perceives Polarization?

We suggest that three psychological factors exacerbate perceived polarization: the categorization of partisans into "our group" and the "opposing group," partisan identification strength as either a Democrat or Republican, and people's personal attitude extremity on political issues. Each of these three factors predicts exaggerated perceptions of political attitude polarization between Democrats and Republicans.

### *People exaggerate polarization of the "opposing group" more than "our group"*

There are at least two reasons why the categorization of Americans into Democrats and Republicans might exaggerate perceived political polarization. We earlier discussed



**Fig. 4.** Democrats', Independents', and Republicans' perceptions of the attitudes held by the Democrat and Republican parties and their presidential candidates. Stripes going across indicate who is making the estimates of stances; bubble color indicates whose views are being estimated (blue = Democrat, red = Republicans). Estimates are aggregated across 10 partisan issues.

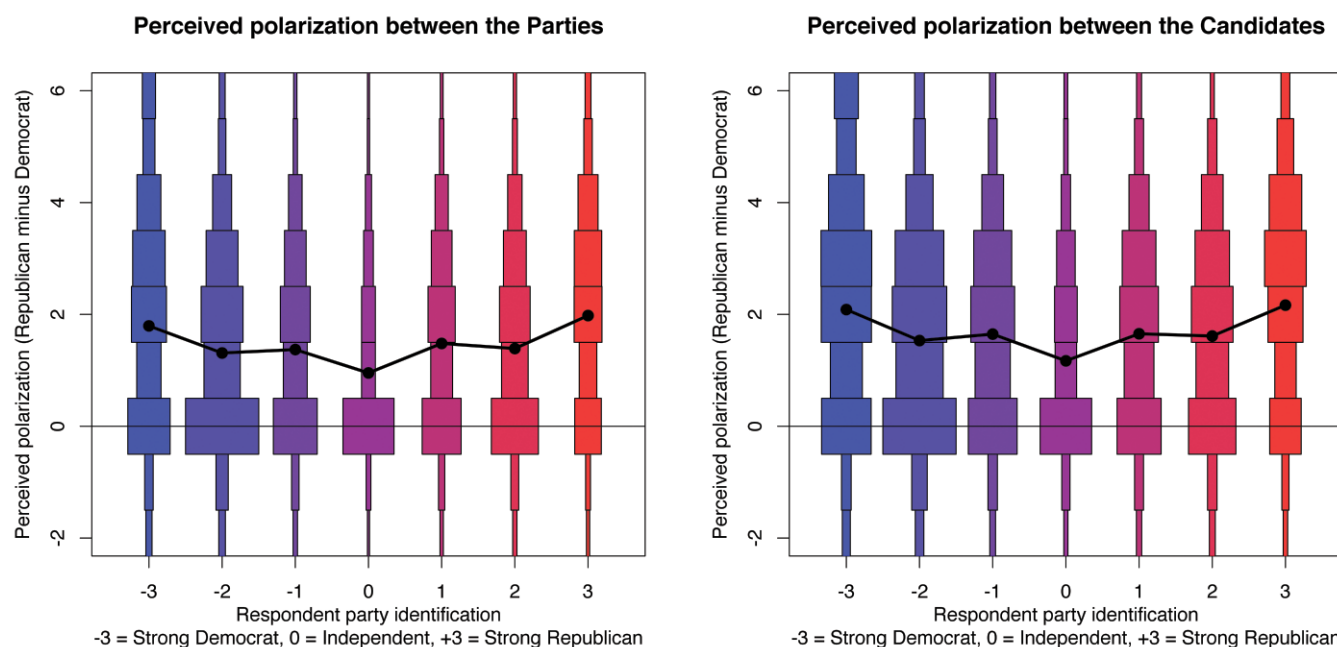
how mere perceptual categorization accentuates perceived differences between Democrats and Republicans. Notice that categorization not only places other people into different groups, it also places other people into "our group" and the "opposing group," at least for those who identify as either Democrat or Republican.

This political "groupiness" binds people into moral tribes (Graham & Haidt, 2010) that can exaggerate perceived polarization. People typically assume that other people's attitudes are swayed more by ideological bias than their own attitudes are and that ideology holds particularly strong sway over partisan opponents (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002; Robinson et al., 1995; Ross & Ward, 1995). People assume that their own attitudes—and presumably those of others in their group—reflect careful, reasoned, dispassionate analyses of evidence, whereas the attitudes of those in opposing groups are more biased, shaped by motivational and ideological concerns (Ross & Ward, 1995).

Democrats may see Democrats' support for increased government services and spending as a rational evaluation of the responsibilities of a government "for the people" but see Republicans as brazenly biased in their assessment, concerned with their own material advancement over the government's moral obligations and therefore opposed to government services and spending. Republicans may have the mirror-image perception,

seeing Republican opposition to increased government services and spending as a rational concern for fiscal prudence, individual responsibility, and a realistic skepticism of government (as opposed to private) efficiency while seeing Democrats as having naive, blind faith in government rather than free markets, at the cost of fiscal recklessness and an erosion of individual responsibility. These perceptions of opposing group bias mean that people should exaggerate perceived polarization of those in the opposing group more than in their own group.

Analysis of the ANES reveal that both Democrats and Republicans see the other group as more polarized than their own group (Fig. 4). This can be seen most clearly by first considering the views of Independents (shown in the middle rows of Fig. 4), who do not belong to either group. These nonpartisan respondents perceive the stances of both the parties and the presidential candidates as being closer together than do the partisan respondents on either side. Considering the perceptions of Independents compared with the perceptions of Democrats and Republicans demonstrates three further points. First, partisan respondents perceive the side that opposes them (e.g., Democrats' perceptions of Republicans and vice versa) as holding more polarized political attitudes compared with nonpartisans' perceptions of that same party. Because both Democrats and Republicans are outgroups for Independents, this pattern



**Fig. 5.** Perceived polarization between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party (left panel) and between Democrat and Republican presidential candidates (right panel) as a function of respondent party identification. At each level of partisan identification, vertical histograms indicate the frequency of the raw data, and black connected dots indicate the simple means.

suggests that partisans exaggerate polarization of the group that opposes them, beyond simply exaggerating the polarization of outgroups. Second, partisan respondents perceive their own group as holding more polarized political attitudes compared with Independents' perceptions of Democrats and Republicans (cf. Robinson et al., 1995). This may reflect a general tendency for partisans to see other partisans as more biased compared with the perceptions of nonpartisans—a tendency that we consider in the next section. Third, when compared with Independents' perceptions, partisans' perceived polarization of the opposing group is always substantially more exaggerated than the perceived polarization of one's own group (compare the effect sizes in Fig. 4). Thus, each group perceives the opposing group as having more polarized attitudes than their own group.

### ***Partisan identification strength predicts perceived polarization***

If partisans exaggerate perceptions of political attitude polarization more than nonpartisans (i.e., Independents), are there some types of partisans who perceive greater polarization? The strength of people's personal identification as a member of a partisan group—as a Democrat or Republican—can powerfully shape perceptions of the differences between groups. People who identify with partisan groups embrace their group as an extension of themselves, and they perceive their group in ways that

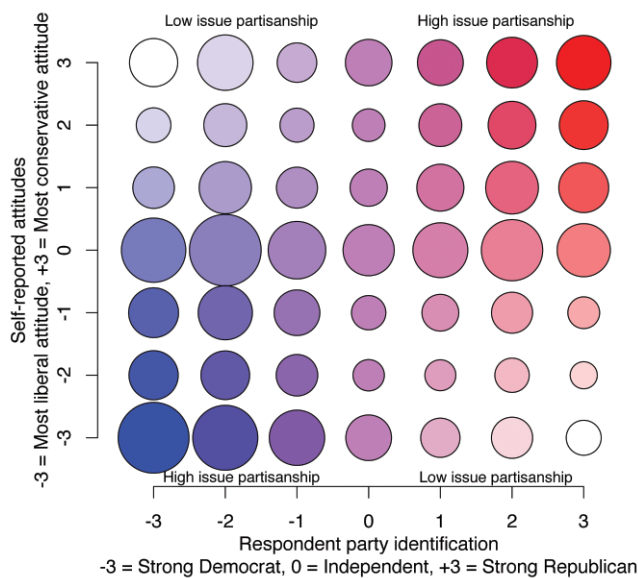
affirm their group's distinctiveness from, and superiority over, opposing groups (Mullen, Dovidio, Johnson, & Copper, 1992; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reher, & Wetherell, 1987). People often affirm the distinctiveness of their group by exaggerating differences between “our group” and the “opposing group” (Brewer, 1999; Mackie, 1986).

To the extent that people have a strong rather than weak identification as a Democrat, for example, they may see Democrats as more differentiated from Republicans in their attitudes toward government spending. Accentuating these perceived differences both affirms Democrats' distinctiveness from Republicans and might even imply that the Democratic stance is more correct than the Republican stance. This analysis implies that the more strongly people identify as either Democrat or Republican, the more polarization they should perceive between Democrats and Republicans.

The ANES bears out this predicted association between strength of partisan identification and perceived polarization (Fig. 5, left panel). Our measure of perceived polarization has a quadratic relationship with partisan identification. The more strongly people identify as either Democrat (moving away from center to the left) or Republican (moving away from center to the right), the more polarization they perceive between Democrats and Republicans.

An analogous pattern occurred for perceptions of presidential candidates. Note that presidential candidates are both group leaders and prototypical members of





**Fig. 6.** Plot of respondents' self-reported political attitudes relative to their strength of party identification. Each of the 49 unique response combinations (7 levels of party identification  $\times$  7 levels of issue attitude) are represented by a circle, with the area of each circle proportional to the number of responses at that response combination. The circles are colored according to the corresponding party identification, and the lightness of the color is proportional to the issue partisanship of the response. Democrats who respond with liberal attitudes and Republicans who respond with conservative attitudes manifest high issue partisanship, whereas Democrats who respond with conservative attitudes and Republicans who respond with liberal attitudes manifest low issue partisanship. The overall distribution of circles reflects low overall levels of consistency between—and, hence, independence of—party identification and attitudes (i.e., the low issue partisanship regions are well populated).

Democratic and Republican groups (Dow, 2001; Schofield & Schnidman, 2011). The same factors that cause strong partisan identifiers to exacerbate perceived differences between Democrats and Republicans should therefore also cause them to exacerbate differences between Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. As seen in Figure 5 (right panel), the more strongly people identify as either Democrat (moving away from center to the left) or Republican (moving away from center to the right), the greater difference they perceive between the attitudes of the Democratic and Republican candidates. Note that the effects of partisan identification strength on perceived polarization between the parties and between the candidates are independent of people's own partisan attitudes. Strong partisan identifiers do not perceive greater polarization simply because they hold more extreme stances.

It is important that partisan identification strength predicts perceived polarization of both the Democratic and Republican parties and of the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. Because political parties are

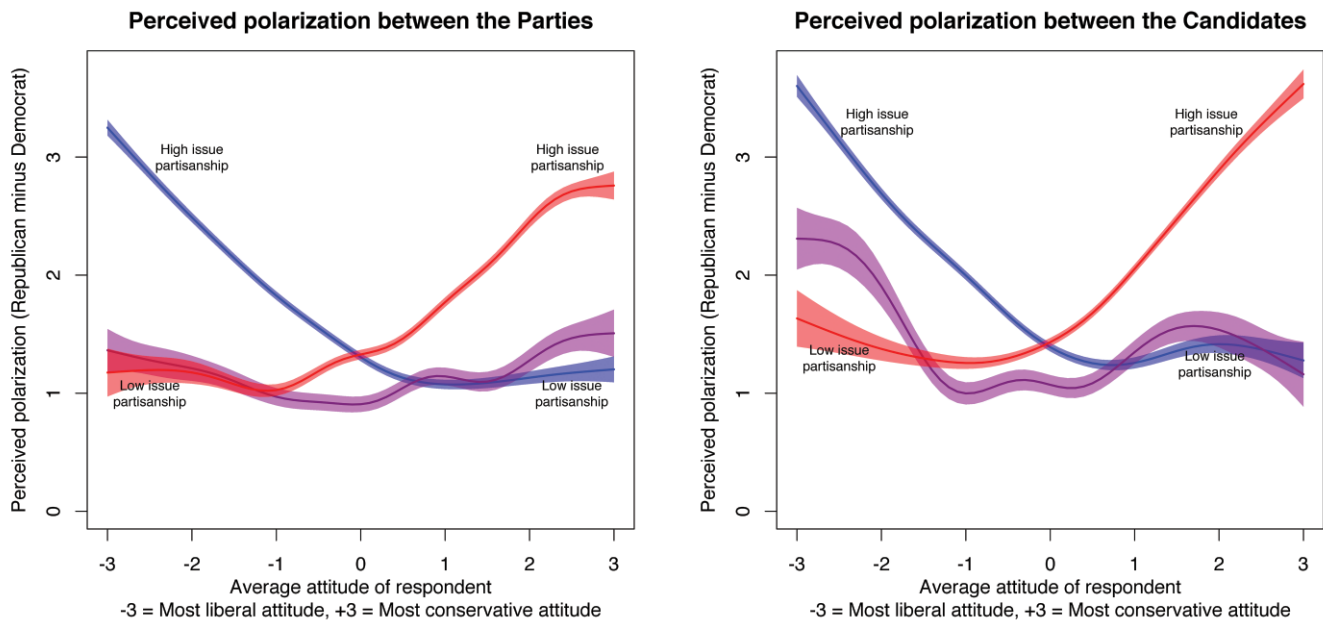
composed of groups of individuals, different estimates of Democratic and Republican attitudes could reflect differences in people's beliefs about the composition of those groups. People with stronger partisan identities might believe that the parties are more "sorted" (Levendusky, 2009)—that is, they might believe the parties are composed of more ideologically coherent assortments of individuals—and therefore have more extreme average attitudes. Unlike parties, presidential candidates are individuals, so different perceptions of candidates' attitudes cannot be due to different beliefs about party sorting. That strength of partisan identification predicts perceived polarization of specific individuals (presidential candidates) implies that different beliefs about party sorting do not explain the effect of partisan identification strength on perceived polarization.

### ***Attitude extremity predicts perceived polarization***

Attitude extremity is the final factor in our framework. We suggest that the extremity of people's partisan attitudes is associated with perceived polarization because people project the extremity of their attitudes onto others (Bartels, 1985; Conover & Feldman, 1982; Koestner, Losier, Worren, Baker, & Vallerand, 1995; Van Boven, Judd, & Sherman, 2012).<sup>3</sup> People assume that other people, both in their own group and in the opposing group, approach partisan issues in a similar way, with similar levels of engagement, emotion, and moral concern (Van Boven et al., 2012). This assumption of at least partial similarity of partisan psychological processes implies that those factors that lead people to hold extreme attitudes should lead them to believe that others hold similarly extreme attitudes.<sup>4</sup>

Before analyzing the effects of attitude extremity, it is worth considering how distinct the extremity of people's attitudes is from the strength of their partisan identification. Democrats obviously have more liberal attitudes than do Republicans. And it stands to reason that more strongly identified Democrats have more extreme liberal attitudes than do weakly identified Democrats.

The ANES reveals that the association between partisan identification strength and partisan attitude extremity is relatively weak. Figure 6 displays the relative frequency of ANES responses in a two-dimensional space defined by partisan identification and partisan attitudes. The overall simple correlation is .19, consistent with other research (cf. Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008). To be sure, strong Democrats tend to have extreme liberal attitudes (represented by the dark blue circles in Fig. 6), and strong Republicans tend to have extreme conservative attitudes (represented by the dark red circles in Fig. 6). We refer to these responses as having high "issue partisanship"



**Fig. 7.** Perceived polarization between the Democratic Party and Republican Party (left panel) and between Democrat and Republican presidential candidates (right panel) as an interactive function of party identification and personal attitudes. The shaded smoothed lines represent plus or minus one standard error from nonparametric regression fits (penalized cubic splines) and are color coded with the blue line representing Democrats (including leaners), the red line representing Republicans (including leaners), and the purple line representing Independents.

(Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008).<sup>5</sup> But there are also substantial numbers of responses with low issue partisanship, that is, Democrats with conservative attitudes and Republicans with liberal attitudes (represented by the light colored circles in Fig. 6). The distribution of responses indicates that strength of partisan identification and attitude extremity are both conceptually and empirically distinguishable.

There is strong evidence in the ANES that attitude extremity predicts perceived polarization. People with more extreme partisan attitudes perceive greater polarization between the parties (Fig. 7, left panel) and between the presidential candidates (Fig. 7, right panel) than do people with less extreme partisan attitudes. The finer details of the data analysis (see the online supplemental materials) reveal two forms of the effect of attitude extremity. First, generalizing across issues, respondents with more extreme attitudes, on average, perceive greater polarization than do respondents with less extreme attitudes (as displayed in Fig. 7). Second, respondents perceive greater polarization on those issues for which they hold more extreme partisan attitudes than on those issues for which they hold less extreme partisan attitudes. This second version of the association between attitude extremity and perceived polarization is particularly informative because it rules out response bias (an overall tendency to see the social world in extremes) as a complete explanation of the association between attitude extremity and perceived polarization.

### ***Issue partisanship predicts perceived polarization***

Although we did not expect it, the pattern of results in Figure 7 makes clear that the effect of attitude extremity on perceived polarization is moderated by partisan identification: Respondents who hold relatively extreme attitudes that are in the same direction of their partisan identification (the high issue partisans in Figs. 6 and 7) perceive greater polarization than do respondents with extreme attitudes that are on the opposite end of the spectrum from their political identification (the low issue partisans in Figs. 6 and 7). Moreover, as with the effects of attitude extremity, the finer details of the data analysis indicate that the interaction between attitudes and partisan identification occurs both between respondents and within respondents. Averaging across issues, we find that people perceive greater political polarization when the direction of their average attitude corresponds with their partisan identification. Within respondents, people perceive greater political polarization on those issues where their attitudes more closely correspond with their partisan identification than on those issues where their attitudes correspond less closely. Democrats perceive greater polarization on those issues for which they hold liberal stances than on those issues for which they hold conservative stances; and Republicans perceive greater polarization on those issues for which they hold conservative stances than on those issues for which they hold liberal stances.

That issue partisanship predicts perceived polarization indicates that the U.S. political landscape seems very different to those whose partisan identities and attitudes are aligned than to those whose identities and attitudes are not aligned. We suspect that these differences reflect the unique social, motivational, and cognitive realities of issue partisans. Cognitively, those high in issue partisanship are likely to have more coherent mental representations that exert greater constraint on the interpretation and weighting of new information (Read & Simon, 2012; Simon & Holyoak, 2002; Simon, Snow, & Read, 2004). Socially, high issue partisans are more likely to have homogeneous partisan social networks (Bosveld, Koomen, & van der Pligt, 1994; Deutsch, 1988) or “echo chambers” (Wallsten, 2005) that may reinforce the idea of a politically polarized United States. And these coherent cognitive and social networks may increase the motivation of high issue partisans to maintain their sense of group distinctiveness. In short, high issue partisans are ideologues (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008; Tetlock, 1984) who may be highly motivated to perceive social-political reality in a consistent and identity-protective manner.

## Conclusion

Social commentators are deeply concerned about political polarization in the United States and the attendant dysfunctional political processes. Political attitude polarization between Democrats and Republicans can pose substantial barriers to a healthy democracy. And to the degree that Democrats and Republicans seem polarized, people are more likely to engage in various forms of political action, from voting in elections to donating money and trying to sway other people’s political opinions. Yet our analysis indicates that political attitude polarization is not as large as it seems and that political attitude polarization seems larger to some people than to others.

People’s perception—and exaggeration—of political polarization can be understood using three social psychological factors and their interactions. We found that people perceive greater polarization when partisans are categorized and people estimate the attitudes of the opposing group relative to their own group; when people strongly identify with their partisan group, whether Democrat or Republican; and when people hold relatively extreme partisan attitudes. These last two factors interacted such that people high in issue partisanship—that is, people whose attitudes correspond with their partisan identity—perceived the greatest levels of political attitude polarization. That these three factors simultaneously, independently, and interactively predict perceptions of polarization in a comprehensive, extensive, longitudinal study of political attitudes in the United States provides evidence for

different strands of psychological theories of categorization, social identity, and egocentric social projection.

Our findings raise pressing questions about psychological foundations of perceived and actual political polarization in the United States. First and foremost is whether the associations we have demonstrated reflect causal relations—do the predictors of perceived polarization actually cause perceived polarization? The ANES is an immensely valuable resource to psychological scientists because it provides a realistic, comprehensive picture of the social-political reality among everyday Americans. Yet the ANES, with rare exception, is not experimental and so does not afford causal inferences, which is perhaps why psychologists underutilize the ANES in favor of more convenient and controllable, yet patently unrepresentative samples of university undergraduates (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Sears, 1986) and Internet respondents (Kahan, 2013). Understanding the causal relations among the associations demonstrated here is a paramount task for future research.

Future research might also examine other measures of perceived polarization between groups. By necessity of the measures in the ANES, our analysis focused on mean differences between Democrats and Republicans. Yet to the degree that polarization refers to how separable Democrats and Republicans are, measures of actual and perceived polarization should incorporate both mean differences and the variability in distributions surrounding those differences—essentially a Cohen’s *d* that captures degree of overlap between the distribution of attitudes (Judd & Van Boven, 2014; Levendusky & Pope, 2011).

These open questions notwithstanding, our results have at least two direct implications for contemporary political discourse. First, nearly all of the effects reported here are symmetrical for Democrats and Republicans. The tendency to overestimate polarization, the association between perceived polarization and political actions, and the factors associated with perceived polarization are true of both Democrats and Republicans. Our framework is a nonpartisan way of conceptualizing the similarities of psychological factors associated with perceived polarization.

Second, among the more striking findings from our analysis is that those who perceive the greatest political attitude polarization in the United States—and, hence, those who most exaggerate political polarization—are those who are themselves most polarized, strongly identifying as party members and holding relatively extreme attitudes that align with their partisan identities. These partisans who perceive the most polarization are also most likely to be politically active, contributing to campaigns, trying to persuade others, and voting in elections. What are the consequences for a healthy democracy when those who are most engaged are most inclined to exaggerate political polarization?

We believe that one consequence is that extreme party candidates are more likely to be nominated and elected. Given perceptions of polarization, extreme candidates are likely to be seen as better representing the party sentiment and better suited to defend against extreme opposing parties. If the exaggeration of polarization shapes the selection of political leaders, the prospects for reduced partisan conflict are rather slim.

### Acknowledgments

We thank Thomas Gilovich, George Loewenstein, David Sherman, Lee Jussim, and members of the Emotion, Decision, Judgment, and Intuition lab at the University of Colorado Boulder for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

### Funding

National Science Foundation Grants 0552120 and 1049125 supported this research.

### Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at <http://pps.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>

### Notes

1. On some issues, respondents misperceived the average attitude of both Democrats and Republicans. Respondents thought that both parties held more liberal attitudes toward the rights of the accused and school busing than they actually did and that both parties held more conservative attitudes toward women's equal role than they actually did. One interpretation of this pattern is that people tend to center their perceptions around the midpoint of the scale, with Democrats to the left and Republicans to the right. Such a centralizing tendency in perceived attitudes could produce overall mean misperception when both Democrats and Republicans hold relatively liberal or conservative attitudes. Because our interest is in people's perception of differences between groups, these mean-level misperceptions are not relevant to the present investigation.
2. The model's estimated voting rates of 60%–80% exceed actual voter turnout rates, which are approximately 60% during presidential elections and 40% during midterm elections. The overreporting of voter turnout in the ANES is well documented (Bernstein, Chadha, & Montjoy, 2001; McDonald, 2003).
3. The tendency to project the extremity of partisan attitudes onto others is independent of the well-documented tendency to project simple attitudes onto others (Marks & Miller, 1987; Robbins & Krueger, 2005; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). The projection of attitude extremity and simple attitudes are distinct, yet simultaneous phenomena (Van Boven et al., 2012).

4. Many studies in intergroup contexts have found that whereas people project their own attitudes onto their own groups, they do not project their attitudes onto others who are not in their group, a pattern of differential projection to the ingroup versus the outgroup (Robbins & Krueger, 2005). Political contexts seem to be unique from other contexts, however, in that it is widely understood that partisan groups stand in opposition to each other such that people negatively project their own attitudes onto opposing groups (Cadinu & Rothbart, 1996).
5. Our terminology follows Baldassarri and Gelman (2008), who differentiated *issue partisanship*, the extent to which attitudes on a particular issue are associated with party identification, from *issue alignment*, the extent to which attitudes on one issue are associated with attitudes on another issue. Both issue partisanship and issue alignment are forms of "constraint" in more traditional terminology, which does not differentiate between the two (Converse, 1962; Zaller, 1992).

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