Perceptions of Group Opinion among the Media and Mass Public

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Abstract

We study how news media professionals and everyday people perceive public opinion among social groups in the United Sates. To do this, we draw on parallel surveys of the mass public and 782 journalists, editors and other media professionals covering politics and government. We find that both media professionals and the mass public overestimate polarization between non-party social groups (e.g., perceive Hispanic and white people to be more polarized on border patrol policy than they actually are). We find that among both members of the mass public and media professionals, liberals perceive polarization between social groups to be larger than conservatives.
Word count: 7,233

1 Introduction

Americans see polarization as a major problem in current politics. In a 2020 poll, 85% of registered voters agreed that Americans were deeply divided on values.[1] This paper documents that these beliefs extend beyond a general sense of division: the public perceives fault lines between segments of American society on specific issues. People overestimate, sometimes dramatically, the gaps in support for salient policies between members of different non-party social groups. These mis-perceptions are not unique to the mass public, but extend also to producers of the media that inform Americans' perceptions of public opinion.

While scholarship has focused on perceptions of partisan polarization (e.g., Levendusky and Malholtra 2016; Westfall et al. 2015; Enders and Armaly 2019), no work, to our knowledge, has focused on perceptions of issue-based polarization with respect to non-party groups (e.g., where do Evangelical Christians stand on abortion). Given the centrality of non-party social groups to U.S. politics and to social life, understanding these perceptions is paramount.

To describe and understand views of division in the American public, this paper measures perceptions of public opinion and polarization[2] among a nationally representative sample of the mass public, alongside a sample of elites: media professionals that cover politics in print, online, radio and television news sources (e.g., journalists, editors, producers). We asked both samples where they perceived various social groups to stand on major issues that, in political discourse, are commonly associated with those groups. For example, we measured perceptions of where black and white people stand on reducing police funding, and where members of labor unions and the wealthy stand on raising the minimum wage.

We find that both journalists and members of the mass public consistently perceive non-party social groups to be more polarized on group-related issues than they actually are. Both samples, however, are accurate in their perceptions of where Democrats and Republicans stand on a highly-

[1] https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/most-americans-say-nation-is-deeply-divided-over-values-poll-says

[2] We focus here on perceptions of polarization in mass issue attitudes, setting aside other important forms of polarization like affective polarization.

partisan issue. Journalists' perceptions are noticeably more accurate than the mass public's.

For example, actual public opinion towards a $15 minimum wage is not highly polarized along class lines: 61% of people with household incomes larger than $250,000 per year support a $15 minimum wage compared to 69% of people in labor unions, a difference of 8 percentage points. Yet media professionals perceive these groups to be polarized by 29 percentage points. The mass public perceives the difference to be nearly 50 percentage points.

These findings suggest a potentially consequential relationship. Mass perceptions of polarization are shaped in part by political coverage in newspapers, television and online news sources (see Levendusky and Malholtra 2016, 338); the media, Mutz (1998, 5) writes, "are tremendously influential in telling people what others are thinking about and experiencing." If media producers affect how Americans perceive the political landscape, then their own perceptions may matter, especially insofar as those perceptions shape how producers engage with and portray group opinion in their work.

2 Mass Views of Group Polarization

Many Americans view social, cultural, and political division as urgent problems. In the 2020 American National Election Studies, for example, more than 10% of respondents cited division or polarization as the most important issue facing the country. For those who cited a specific dimension of polarization, partisanship was the most common, but others worried about division between racial, cultural, and religious groups.

Are members of these groups as divided on important issues as Americans perceive them to be? If Americans perceive divisions in group opinion accurately, their sharp concern about polarization reflects a recognition of genuine discord in the public. If Americans perceive more polarization than exists in truth, however, their concern may be more reflective of how their information sources portray polarization than of polarization itself.

Past work on partisan polarization suggests reason to be skeptical that we are truly as divided

as it seems: many people perceive Democrats and Republicans to be more polarized than they actually are across a host of issues (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016; Westfall et al. 2015; Enders and Armaly 2019; but see Dias, Pearl and Lelkes, n.d.). Given that people overestimate polarization between partisan groups—which are, in truth, quite polarized—there is reason to expect people overestimate polarization between other groups as well.

Though understanding perceptions of partisan polarization is certainly important, we focus here on perceptions of polarization between other important social groups based on class, race, and culture. That these group divisions increasingly sort along partisan lines does not undermine their importance—instead, part of the reason partisan division today is so affectively loaded is that these more fundamental group identities undergird political divides (Mason and Wronski 2018).

To be concrete, we are interested in the accuracy of people's perceptions of differences in opinion between groups on political issues. For example, when asked about public opinion on raising the minimum wage, a survey respondent may guess that 25% of wealthy people and 75% of working class people support this policy. Imagine that in truth, 40% of wealthy people and 60% of the working class support this policy. This survey respondent would have *overestimated* class polarization on this issue substantially. If, instead, they had guessed that 50% (or 10%, or 90%) of both groups supported the policy, this would substantially *underestimate* polarization. We are not concerned here with the absolute accuracy of perceptions, but only with the accuracy of perceptions of the gap between groups, as we see the latter as underlying the general public concern about social discord.

To form expectations about the accuracy of polarization perceptions, we turn to literatures more generally interested in how people learn about what others think. One simple prediction comes from work on the false consensus effect, a phenomenon in which people tend to overestimate the number of others who share their beliefs (Ross, Greene, and House 1977). If people assume others share their positions, they may underestimate differences between groups. A more nuanced account of social projection suggests that while people assume ingroup members share their views, this tendency is weaker (though still generally present) for outgroup members and for people more

distant from the respondent (Marks and Miller 1987; Robbins and Krueger 2005). Even so, this points to an expectation of smaller differences between groups than actually exist, as both ingroup and outgroup estimates are pulled in the direction of the respondent's own view. Following the above example, a person who identified as working class and supported raising the minimum wage might assume 90% of their fellow working class members shared their opinion, while only 80% of wealthy people did so.

Another perspective comes from literature on stereotype learning. By "stereotype," we simply mean a trait associated with a social group; stereotype learning is the process by which someone learns to associate a trait with a group. A simple model of stereotype learning would entail people observing how often traits occur among members of different groups and updating beliefs about the trait-group association based on new information. A person might read a news article about how many working class people support raising the minimum wage, or they might meet wealthy people and discuss their opinions on the issue; both kinds of information can lead to learning about the frequency of these traits in each group.

If people encounter accurate information about group-trait associations—if the news they read accurately represents the opinions of the working class, or if the wealthy people they meet have a representative set of beliefs—stereotypes should be accurate. But, of course, this is not always the case. Random error in the information people encounter can lead to wide variation in perceptions of the same groups' opinions. Systematic bias in information about group opinion can lead to systematic errors in stereotyping—an especially realistic possibility if people are learning about group opinion through mass media biased in a common direction[3]. We might expect, then, that people will over- or under-estimate polarization in line with the portrayal of group opinion in mass media. As we will discuss at length later on, there is reason to think media portrayals will be more likely to overstate than understate group differences, which would lead people to overestimate polarization.

Setting aside the directional accuracy of the stereotypes people hold, work in this area often

[3]Any individual's encounters with group members might be systematically biased as well, but it is more difficult to say whether this would lead to aggregate *bias* in perceptions

finds that people overapply them: they too readily assume any given group member matches the group's stereotypical traits, and they see groups (especially outgroups) as more homogeneously stereotype-consistent than they are. These tendencies could be consistent with rational belief formation (Gershman and Cikara 2023), though some argue that the motivation to maintain distinctive group identities contributes to over-application of stereotypes (e.g. Simon and Pettigrew 1990) or that it results from effort-saving heuristics (Ahler and Sood 2023). Regardless of its cause, this points to a prediction: people will overestimate the proportion of people in a group who hold stereotype-consistent beliefs, which should lead them to overestimate polarization. For example, if a person knows the stereotype that wealthier people tend to be economically conservative and working class people economically liberal, they may guess that these groups are further apart from one another than they are in truth in their economic attitudes.

A final perspective to consider here concerns measurement. Even if people had accurate beliefs about polarization between groups, they might have difficulty translating those beliefs into numeric estimates of the proportion of group members who hold an opinion. For example, Guay (2021) shows that people guessing the proportion of people with an attribute tend to struggle when the true proportion is quite small or quite large, often "rescaling" these extreme values closer to 50%. This tendency might lead people to underestimate group differences if the true proportions are extreme. As we will see, though, the group opinions we measure here are often fairly close to 50%.

Another kind of error could arise due to ignorance of base rates—that is, for example, if people don't know the proportion of people overall who support raising the minimum wage, they will have trouble identifying the proportion of wealthy and working class people who support it, even if they know where these groups stand relative to the population as a whole (see Ahler and Sood 2018 for a similar application). This would be an important concern if we were interested in the accuracy of perceptions of wealthy people's support, or of the working class's, but we are interested here in the difference between the two. Misjudging the overall rate of support, then, is not as important for our quantity of interest.

Looking across these perspectives, we expect on balance that people will overestimate polar-

ization between social groups. We are skeptical that projection of one's own views will be strong enough to lead people to underestimate group differences; the groups at issue here are broad, heterogeneous social categories, poor candidates for people to assume even ingroup members will mirror their own preferences. We also do not expect measurement concerns to significantly attenuate reported perceptions.

Instead, we think it likely that the primary way people form beliefs about typical opinion in social groups is through mass media, and we expect people to rely too heavily on these stereotypes when estimating the proportion of group members who hold a position. When asked to estimate opinion among groups associated with different sides of an issue, this should lead people to assume the groups' opinions are further apart from one another than they are in truth. This is consistent with existing findings on perceptions of partisan opinion: people are increasingly aware of which "sides" Republicans and Democrats take on issues, and they see members of these groups as further apart on those issues than they are in truth.

3 Americans Overestimate Group Polarization

To explore Americans' perceptions of polarization between social groups, we rely on a survey fielded on a sample from NORC (National Opinion Research Center) Amerispeak[4] (n=1,054 U.S. adults) in October 2021. Respondents answered a series of questions about their perceptions of group attitudes. For each of 5 policy issues, we asked respondents for their best guess of the percentage of people in two social groups that support a group-linked policy. For example, on the issue of abortion, we asked respondents to guess what percentage of "women" and what percentage of "Christian Evangelicals" would support a policy to "prohibit all abortions after the 20th week of pregnancy."

We chose issues for investigation based on two criteria. First, each issue has the potential for

[4]NORC maintains a panel of survey respondents and samples from this panel to create nationally representative respondent pools. All data in the national sample are weighted using post-stratification weights provided by NORC. NORC, which runs the General Social Survey, is considered a gold-standard conductor of public opinion polling. Demographic data for this sample can be found in SA 1.

group-polarized opinion because it is linked to a particular social group we expect respondents to see as differentially demanding or benefiting from the policy (Elder and O'Brian 2022). The other group is chosen to serve as a comparison or contrast to the demander/beneficiary group. For some of these choices, these are not mutually exclusive sets of people demanding opposite political outcomes. For example, labor union demands are often contrasted against the demands of business groups (capital) and the wealthy, even though some wealthy people may also be members of labor unions.[5] Christian Evangelicals and women are also overlapping. However, in both cases, political discourse contrasts these groups as opposing policy demanders, while mutually exclusive groups (e.g., union members vs. non-union members) are not as substantively salient comparisons.[6] For further details about how each group and issue was chosen, see SA 1.

Second, we chose issues for which we could calculate a baseline of actual group opinion: that is, a survey was conducted sometime in the year preceding our poll that allowed us to know the proportion of each group that supported the relevant policy. We sought opinion questions that offered respondents only two options: to "support" or "oppose" a given policy. This enables a neat comparison when asking respondents what percent of group X supports policy Y.[7] Full question wording can be found in Appendix 1.

1. **Abortion:** Prohibit all abortions after the 20th week of pregnancy. Groups: Women/Christian Evangelicals.
2. **Police:** Decrease the number of police on the street by 10 percent, and increase funding for other public services. Groups: White people/Black people.
3. **Immigration:** Increase the number of border patrols on the US-Mexican border. Groups: Latino/a people/White people.
4. **Government:** The federal government has a responsibility to provide an adequate standard of living for all Americans. Groups: Democratic/Republican voters.

[5]In the CES, which we use as a baseline, 2.1 percent of people in households with an income of $250,000 or higher are union members and 6.7% of union members have a household income higher than $250,000.

[6]This point is related to our broader expectation that people overestimate polarization: policy-demanding groups themselves are sometimes not mutually exclusive, leading us to believe that people might regularly over-estimate differences.

[7]SA 6 includes data from an unrelated study asking people to place groups using an alternative format: to place Black and white people on a 7-point policy scale on police funding (a similar question as asked on this survey), as well as several other issues. We observe similar patterns; people perceive group opinion to be more polarized than it is, in fact. This suggests our results are not sensitive to the percentage question format.

5. **Minimum wage:** Raise the minimum wage to $15 an hour. Groups: Americans with household incomes of $250,000 or more/People in labor unions.

We calculated the "correct answer" for each question based on Pew's 2021 American Trends Panel (for the government responsibility question) and the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES) for each of the other questions[8]. In writing our survey questions, we hewed as closely as possible to the language used by Pew and the CES.

Figure 1 displays these "correct" estimates of group opinion (gray points) alongside perceptions of group opinion for the median respondent in our survey of people in the United States (blue points). Estimates closer to the "outside" of the plot represent more stereotype-consistent perceptions. On each non-party group-issue pair, people perceive the group to be more extreme than they are.[9]

On the far right of the graph is the distance between respondents' perceptions of each group's opinion. To calculate this, we subtract the median perception of support among the more liberal group from support among the conservative one, and then take the absolute value. For example, the median perception among mass public was that 80% of members in labor unions wanted to increase the minimum wage to $15 per hour, but only 30% of people in households over $250,000 wanted to raise the minimum wage. This gives a perception of polarization of 50%. This is notated next to the top set of blue points in Figure 1. We repeat this process for each group and sample. The gray point for each issue maps the actual difference in public opinion between social groups, as measured by our baseline survey.

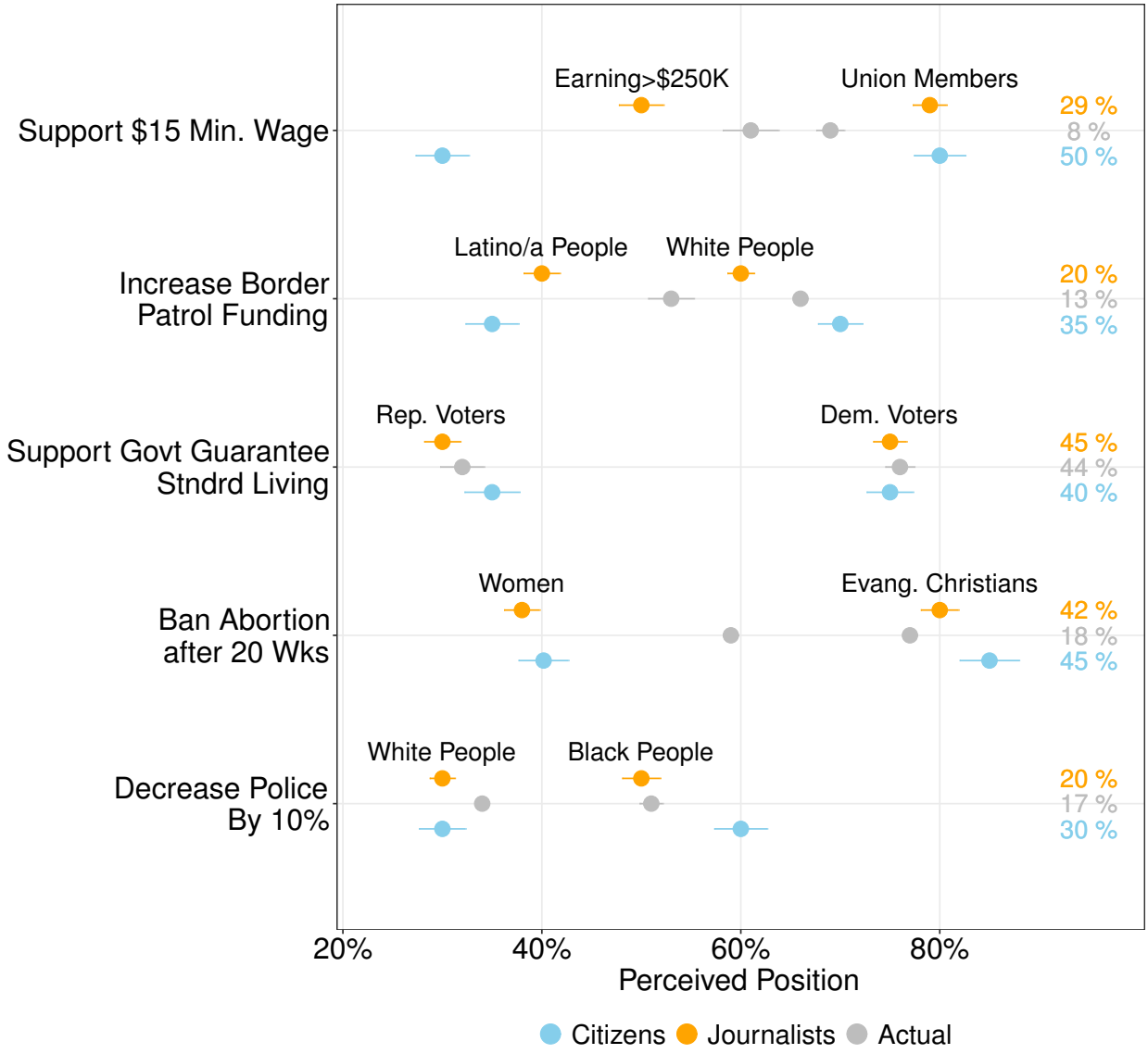
Compared to the true gaps in opinion for these groups (shown by the gray points), which ranged from 10-20%, respondents' median guesses of the gaps were between 2 and 5 times as large.

Notably, perceptions of partisan polarization were highly accurate. This may be because the issue we chose, on the size of government, is one of the longest-standing and most central feature of partisan contestation; prior work finding the public overestimates partisan polarization includes

[8]We pre-registered which polls we would use as a benchmark. They can be found here: (URL blinded for review).

[9]We included a simple attention check for web survey takers that stated: *It's important to us that survey takers are reading each question carefully. To confirm that you will read each question carefully, please enter "25" in the text box below. Then, proceed to the next question. Enter your answer here:*. 98.5% passed the attention check.

Figure 1: Perceptions of Group Support for Policies



Note. This plot shows actual support (gray points) and support as perceived by journalists (orange points) and citizens (blue points) for each policy listed down the y-axis for each group noted in the body of the plot, measured by the median estimate. Groups for each policy are listed above their estimate. The numbers listed down the right-side are the difference in medians (perceived polarization) for the respective group/sample.

a wider range of issues. (However, more recent research shows ordinary people to be quite accurate in their perceptions of partisan polarization (Dias, Pearl and Lelkes, n.d.).)

4 Why Perceive Division?

Across a variety of non-partisan social groups and issues, Americans in our survey saw groups as further apart than they were in truth. We expected this pattern of overestimating division for two reasons: a basic tendency to over-apply stereotypes, and that information about others' opinions largely comes from mass media portrayals that highlight division. We will now return to our claim that mass media coverage is likely to overstate the degree of difference between groups.

Public opinion is a central topic for political news. Even in content focused on political leaders, issues, and events, news stories often include information about public reactions or reception. This media coverage of public opinion can inform fellow citizens, public officials, and other members of the media about what Americans think. This kind of reporting is important across political contexts. For example, a recent study of Belgian media, which to our knowledge is the only study that investigates frequency of public opinion news coverage, finds that nearly 20% of news pieces include coverage that presents some sort of public opinion (Beckers 2020).

These portrayals of public opinion can come in many forms. For example, journalists can report the results of polls on groups' attitudes, they can interview elites with some claim to expertise on how group members think, or they could ask assorted members of the mass public to describe their views (a "man on the street" or "vox pop" interview, or the more-recent practice of drawing such statements from social media).

While each of these can contain valuable information about group attitudes, each leaves room for leeway in which portrayed opinion can depart from ground truth. Survey estimates of opinion—especially subgroup opinion—can vary widely between polls, based on random variation and on design choices like sampling methods and question wording. The views represented in vox pops also vary widely, and there is evidence journalists contexualize them using their view of the commonness of the espoused opinions in the broader population (Beckers 2017, 1035). Experts can be contacted selectively and may share common biases based on elite socialization processes or information streams.

Even given that journalists have leeway in how they portray group opinion, why might this leeway be used to exaggerate polarization? As with many features of news media, coverage of division could be explained by two sets of factors: supply and demand.

One possibility is that media outlets tend to *supply* coverage of group polarization due to features of the news production process–that is, producers tend to create these stories over those portraying balanced or consensus opinion. Perhaps journalists and their editors believe stories exaggerating polarization are truer or more newsworthy, or perhaps the kinds of sources journalists consult tend to emphasize polarization. Across political media, there is evidence journalists prefer and actively produce content emphasizing conflict (Bertholome et al. 2015; Hanggli and Kriesi 2010).

Another possibility is that consumers of news *demand* coverage of group polarization–that is, they choose these kinds of stories over those portraying balanced or consensus opinion. There is reason to expect this is true, given recent work showing that people prefer to read, share, and engage with media coverage that emphasizes important social identities (Hopkins, Lelkes, and Wolken 2022).

We expect both supply and demand factors to matter here. While we do not intend this as an exhaustive description of the news production process, or of the processes through which exaggeration of group division could occur, consider the following stylized steps.

1. A journalist does *(not)* believe opinion is polarized
2. The journalist finds it *(no)* easier to find evidence (from experts, politicians, pollsters, etc.) that opinion is polarized
3. An editor is *(no)* more willing to publish or promote pieces showing polarization
4. Consumers are *(no)* more likely to engage with polarization coverage

If bias appears at any single stage of this process, the result could be a body of coverage that exaggerates group division. Even if there is no tendency towards polarization in the first three

(supply) steps of the process, producers would learn to supply more polarization-focused content to attract consumers who preferred it. On the other hand, even if consumers preferred coverage on consensus, biases from journalists, sources, or editors could still create an oversupply of polarization content. Future work may examine which, if any, of these steps introduce or mitigate against bias.

We focus here on one foundational part of this process: journalists' own beliefs about polarization. We expect that journalists themselves perceive groups to be more polarized than they are in fact. These perceptions, in turn, color how journalists portray public opinion, affecting their search for and charactarization of opinion. This bias, if unchecked by clear evidence, editor discretion, or some other intervention, could result in coverage that exaggerates group polarization.

We have argued that the mass public overestimates polarization at least in part because they learn groups' positions from the media. But where do media producers' perceptions of group opinion come from? Of course, media producers consume media as well, and they also learn from news coverage about where groups stand. The other key mechanism discussed above also applies to both journalists and the mass public: people often rely too heavily on stereotypes, such that when forming beliefs about characteristics of group members, people tend to overweight how much all group members resemble the group's prototypical member (Doosje et al. 2007; Kahneman and Tversky 1972; Bordalo et al. 2016).

Ought journalists have more or less accurate perceptions of group opinion than the general public? Prior work generates competing expectations. On the one hand, journalists have access to a great deal of information about politics in general and group attitudes in particular, which could allow more accurate perceptions. The professional socialization of media elites should also lead them to be motivated to seek out accurate information.

On the other hand, journalists have some characteristics that could lead them to perceive exaggerated polarization even further than the mass public. Educated, politically-interested Americans–demographics of journalists and their expert sources–tend to have more polarized, party-consistent attitudes than others (e.g., Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). Journalists' exposure to these more-polarized

groups may lead them to perceive greater polarization in the populace as a whole. The next section tests these competing expectations about the accuracy of journalists' perceptions.

5 Media Professionals Overestimate Group Polarization

To investigate perceptions of polarization by producers of political media, we conducted a survey in the summer and fall of 2021 in which we surveyed content creators of political news at newspaper, TV, radio, and online outlets. We collected a list of journalists, editors, producers, and other news-producing personnel at a variety of local and national publications across the United States. To locate people who cover political news, we combine two directories. First, we include any person tagged as a "political reporter" by Leadership Connect, which compiles contact lists across leading business organizations and government. We combine this with a list of contacts with the tag of "political journalists" from Prowly Media Database.

Because we are interested in political news producers, we remove anyone with a job title that does not relate to writing or disseminating news. This filter excludes publishers or owners, guest bookers, and operations managers. For this same reason, we eliminate people whose email address is not at the domain of an institution (e.g., those whose email address ends with @gmail.com). Finally, we delete listings without an email address or where entries where the email is not personal (e.g., editor@newspaper.com). This strategy aligns with other scholarship and best practices for creating a sample frame of media professionals (Peterson 2020; Coddington, Lews and Belair-Gagnon 2021; Molyneux and Zamith 2020).

The list that remains includes local and national television outlets, print newspapers, online news sites, and politically-oriented magazines.[10] This process yielded a list of 7,960 journalists with valid email addresses across the two databases. We invited this list to participate in our survey via email. To further ensure our sample only included political news producers, we screened respondents within our survey by asking whether they wrote, edited or produced a piece on politics

[10]While we are generally interested in full-time political media professionals, a manual review of our contacts (after the screening process just described) revealed that some people were contributors rather than full-time journalists. We leave these contributors in the sample because they also create political news, sometimes quite prominently.

in the past month. The survey terminated for respondents who answered "no." Out of 7,960 invitations distributed, 1,125 media professionals interacted with the survey in some way (i.e. clicked the link, even if they did not answer any questions). Of these 1,125, 65 respondents said they did not create political news, terminating the survey. Of the remaining respondents, another 298 people did not complete the survey.[11]

This resulted in 782 responses included in the study for a response rate of 9.8% (10.6% if including respondents who screened out). This aligns with response rates by other, reputable surveys of journalists.[12] Although there is no identifiable list of all political journalists in the United States (and thus makes it difficult to benchmark against population characteristics as can be done with the mass public), our survey closely tracks demographics from a 2022 Pew survey of journalists and the 2022 American Journalist Survey, both highly reputable sources. The demographics of journalists included in our sample, as well as the benchmarks, can be found in the SA section 2.2. Our survey is slightly more male (65% compared to Pew benchmark of 60%), slightly more white (82% to Pew benchmark of 78%) and slightly more liberal (59% compared to American Journalists survey of 53%).

Respondents to this survey answered the same set of questions described in our survey of the mass public: that is, they reported what proportion of people supported a particular policy proposal in each of two social groups. The five policy areas were also the same: raising the minimum wage, border patrol funding, a government-guaranteed standard of living, an abortion ban after 20 weeks, and decreasing police funding.[13]

Alongside mass perceptions, Figure 1 shows the position (median) of each social group esti-

[11] This includes respondents that skipped more than 4 of the key placement questions described below; a number of respondents clicked through the survey to look at questions without answering any.

[12] See: https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2022/06/14/journalist-survey-methodology/ and https://www.theamericanjournalist.org/_files/ugd/46a507_4fe1c4d6ec6d4c229895282965258a7a.pdf

[13] To ensure the journalists interpreted these questions as we intended, we asked a few respondents a multiple-choice question comparing policy support between groups. We asked, "In the average U.S. opinion poll in the past year, which of the groups listed below is more likely to support the following policy: Decrease the number of police on the street by 10 percent, and increase funding for other public services." Respondents could then choose white people, black people, or that they were not sure in a multiple choice list. The multiple choice answers correlated with the open ended responses. Importantly, respondents who indicated they were "unsure" in the multiple-choice response rated black and white people to have the same, or nearly the same, support for reducing police funding in the open-ended response.

mated by journalists, along with the baseline estimate. Again, estimates closer to the "outside" of the plot represent more stereotype-consistent perceptions. For example, the first trio of lines shows support of a $15 minimum wage among high-income people and union members. Media professionals (plotted in orange) estimate that about 80% of union members support this policy. This is more than the 70% of union members who actually support it, as measured in the CES (plotted in gray). Journalists estimate 50% of high-income people support this, less than the approximately 60% of wealthy people that actually support it.

Again, we turn to the question of polarization between the perception of competing policy groups. The difference in perceptions between the chosen groups is listed down the right-hand side of Figure 1, color coded for each estimate. Media professionals, marked by the orange text, consistently over-estimate the difference between non-party groups. However, media professionals, when compared to members of the mass public, over-estimate polarization to a lesser degree.

6 Variation in Perceptions by Issue, Group, and Background

While our main focus has been on differences in the median perception of opinion in each group, the variation in estimates across issues and between journalists and the mass public is also informative. We might expect that estimates are more clustered for the kinds of groups to which people are most likely to over-apply stereotypes, like outgroups or minority groups, or simply on issue/group questions on which more evidence is available.

Figure 2 shows a density plot of perceptions for both media professionals and the mass public.[14] Journalists, across most of the groups asked about, show less variation in their responses than the mass public. This is perhaps because journalists, compared to a cross-section of the mass public, are themselves relatively homogeneous or receive their news information from similar sources, potentially leading to more homogeneous views.

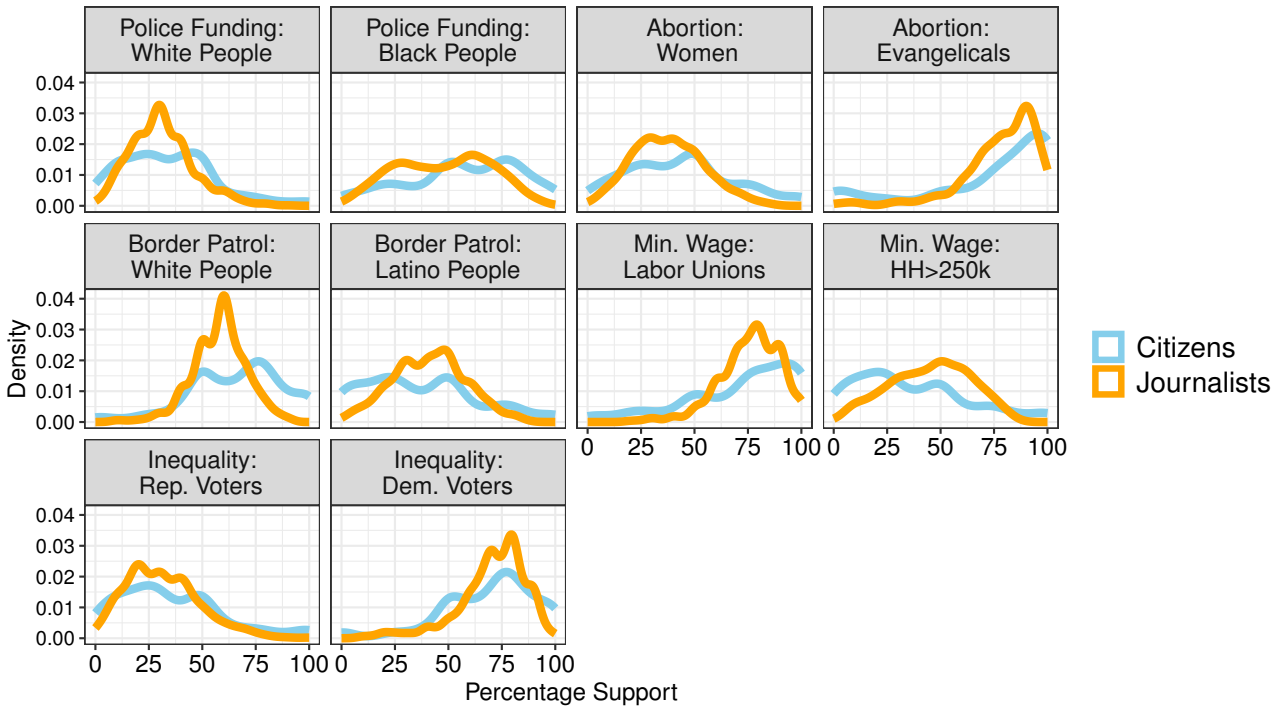
Of particular note is that perceptions of white people's attitudes are much more concentrated among journalists relative to their perceptions of African-American opinion on police funding

[14] SA 5 shows the standard deviation of each sample's estimates.

or Latinx people's attitudes towards border patrol levels. This does not simply appear to be a ceiling/floor effect: journalists perceive white people to be concentrated across different levels between police funding and the border patrol.

The question of police funding is of particular interest. Among journalists, the modal estimate was that 60% of black people wanted to decrease the number of police and increase funding for other services. But there was also a long left tail of people who estimated only a small number of black people wanted to decrease police funding, with a fair density of respondents who believed that only 30-40% of African Americans wanted to decrease the number of police. Several journalists emailed us to explicitly detail this variation for police funding, noting correctly that several public opinion polls showed that African-Americans expressed very low support for complete or drastic de-funding of police departments. This differed from the question posed which specified a decrease of 10%.

Figure 2: Density Plot of Perceptions



Note. Density plot of respondent perceptions of group opinion among journalists (orange) and the mass public (blue).

Both the mass public and media professionals had relatively homogeneous views of where

evangelical Christians stood on abortion, but relatively diffuse views of where women stood on abortion; journalists' perceptions of white people's positions on both racially-inflected issues were also more sharply concentrated. On the other two issues, estimates of the more liberal group's views were more concentrated: respondents both viewed Democrats and members of Labor Unions to have more homogeneous views than Republicans and higher income households. This pattern prevents us from concluding that estimates are more clustered for either liberal or conservative groups, for those that journalists are likely to consider ingroups[15], or for minority groups.

Another way to understand misperceptions is to analyze the characteristics of respondents that lead them to perceive more or less division in each case. If people are overestimating polarization due to a lack of knowledge, we might expect more-educated and higher-income members of the mass public to be more accurate, as should journalists with more experience in their field. If membership in particular groups matters for perceptions on issues related to that group, we would expect social identities like gender, class, and ideology to be related to accuracy only for their associated issue.

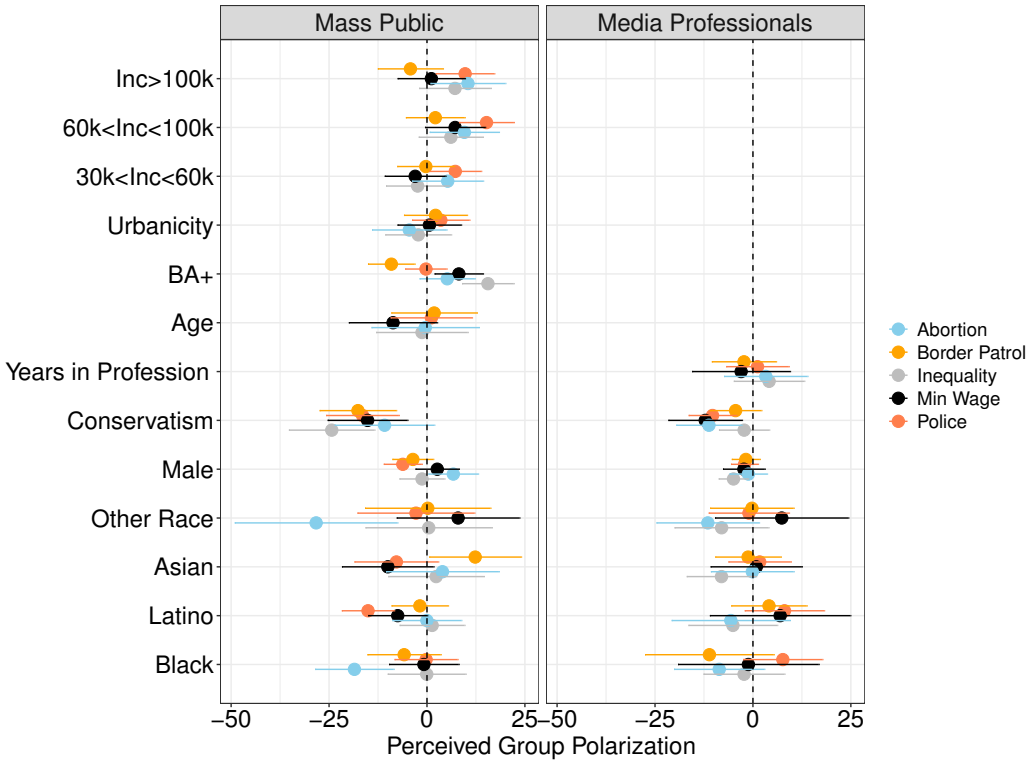
Figure 3 plots the predictive power of demographic variables available for the mass public and journalist samples for accuracy of perceptions of polarization. There were no clear differences in accuracy by income, urbanicity, education, or age among the mass sample (though higher-income and higher-education respondents were, if anything, *more* likely to overestimate polarization), nor by years in the profession for journalists. There were also no clear differences by race, gender, or ideology specific to the issues related to those groups.

Most consistently, across both issues and samples, conservatives perceive social groups, at least the ones asked about in this survey, to be less polarized than liberals do. For example, the most liberal respondents viewed Democrats and Republicans to be almost 25 percentage points more polarized than the most conservative respondents. Among media professionals, no other characteristics consistently predict perceptions.[16]

[15]SA 5 directly tests this for journalists and the mass public and finds no consistent evidence that people more consistently predict in-group opinions (e.g., no evidence that African Americans are better at estimating public opinion among African-Americans).

[16]The same demographics in some cases were not available to us in both samples. For example, while we do not have

Figure 3: Predictors of Perceptions



Note: Figures show coefficients from a multi-variable regression of perceptions of polarization on demographic indicators. Positive values mean that covariate predicts higher levels of perceived polarization. All variables scaled from 0-1. The ideology variable is scaled such that higher values are more conservative, and urbanicity is coded such that higher values correspond with more urban areas. Regressions in tabular form and bivariate models are in SA 3.

SA 4 investigates the role of ideology further by breaking down group perceptions by respondents' ideological self-identification. On abortion, police funding and the border wall, liberal respondents in the mass-public and media sample over-estimate polarization because they view the left-leaning group to be significantly more liberal than do conservative respondents (and than the baseline "truth" estimate). On the minimum wage, variation among journalists largely emerges from the left significantly under-estimating the support for the minimum wage among high-income households and marginally over-estimating support among labor unions. On partisan polarization, little variation emerged, with the exception that conservatives in the mass public perceived Republicans to be marginally further to the right than our baseline estimate.

This finding is somewhat consistent with a social projection hypothesis: people perceive groups

age data for journalists, we use the number of years they have spent in the profession as a proxy.

to be more liberal if they are more liberal, but this is generally concentrated among ideologically-aligned groups on the left (e.g., liberals perceive people of color to be considerably more liberal than they are).

7 Conclusion

The results presented above show that Americans significantly overestimate divisions between social groups on matters of public policy. Members of the political media also overestimate social group polarization, though their perceptions are more accurate than those of the mass public. Both groups have accurate perceptions of partisan polarization on an issue which is, in truth, deeply polarized. Across both samples, liberals overestimate group polarization at higher rates than do conservatives. Further work is needed to understand the causes and consequences of these perceptions, as well as the relationship between media professionals' perceptions and those in the mass public.[17]

When over-estimating the share of group members that hold stereotype-consistent positions, respondents are likely making useful simplifications that allow them to understand political cleavages and simply extending them too far. The majority of even the mass public sample has accurate perceptions of group opinion in an important respect: they were able to place these groups on the correct "sides" of one another, accurately identifying which group is more liberal and which is more conservative. This can be very useful knowledge in making sense of political conflict (Elder and O'Brian 2022). To the extent these mis-perceptions feed a sense of frustration or despair over the country's divisions, though, useful simplifications may do more harm than good.

8 References

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[17] Appendix section 5 describes some exploratory but inconclusive analyses on this front.

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