

Political discourse often seems to be divided not just by different preferences, but by entirely different representations of the debate. Are partisans able to accurately describe the arguments for their opponents' position, or do they instead generate unrepresentative "straw men"? The current research focuses on the healthcare debate in the United States, and partisans on both sides were asked to describe the best arguments for and against ObamaCare. Across three sets of experiments, partisans were fundamentally limited in their ability to simulate their opponents' perspective. Compared to descriptions of their own side, partisans' descriptions of their opponents were unrepresentative, lower quality, and were reliably distinguished from their opponents' genuine arguments. This held true even when partisans were incentivized to be accurate. Text analysis revealed that imitations were more stereotypical - but less extreme - than their genuine counterparts. Individual difference analyses show that intergroup contact can attenuate the straw man effect, and that political sophistication can exacerbate it. This research provides new evidence that straw man arguments are rooted in ignorance rather than antagonism, and we discuss the implications of these findings for our current understanding of partisan debate.