

The Christian Science Monitor

The Other Side

If you talk to anyone in the US, they'll tell you that politics are more polarized than ever before. Which is true... technically. But millions of Americans find themselves in the middle. So are we really as polar opposite as it may appear?

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Editor's note: This page includes a transcript of episode two, "The Other Side." To listen to the episode, please visit our landing page.

EPISODE TWO TRANSCRIPT

MEDIA MONTAGE: There is an intensity on the Democratic side that we have not seen in a long time.

MEDIA MONTAGE: And he says it himself. He's going to wage war against Republicans.

MEDIA MONTAGE: I think the Democrats are digging a deeper hole.

MEDIA MONTAGE: Maybe you guys didn't hear it, because you don't want to hear good things from Donald Trump...

SAMANTHA LAINE PERFAS: Guys. This episode is a tricky one, and I sort of feel like I'm walking into a minefield. I want to talk about political parties and how perhaps the great division we hear in the news... doesn't have to be that way. And in fact it's not. The idea that Democrats and Republicans are completely opposite of each other? Well, that's a perception gap.

I'm Samantha Laine Perfas and this is "Perception Gaps" by The Christian Science Monitor.

Before you call me crazy, let me backup and talk a bit about why I wanted to do this episode. A few years ago, Pew Research Center released a study with a few charts comparing political leanings through the last few decades. It's a bit hard to explain, so feel free to sign up for our newsletter at csmonitor.com/perceptiongaps, and you'll be able to see the charts yourself. But essentially, the charts overlay Republican political leanings with Democrat leanings. In 1994, it looks like two little mountains: one red and one blue, with a lot of overlap. If you look at 2014, just 20 years later, it's the same two mountains with a little less overlap.

When the study came out, most of the headlines sounded like this: America more divided along party lines than ever. Yes, it's true that we're more divided. Pew's latest data shows that the gap has widened even further since 2014. But millions of Americans are still represented in the middle area. That's the reality. The small percentage of Americans with extreme views, are just louder than everyone else. Axios recently highlighted a new report called "Hidden Tribes" that showed 14 percent of America, roughly half left and half right, are extreme - they're consistently super involved in the political conversation, loud, and angry, while 67 percent of the country is disengaged or simply exhausted. The majority of Americans are not politically extreme. So why does it feel like we are?

GAURAV SOOD: Even though people are pretty similar, right, why is there so much animosity, if you will, and what's the reason behind that?

PERFAS: This is Gaurav Sood. During his academic career, he studied how small differences can be the genesis of big divides. One study that he did looked at the misperceptions we have around the composition of political parties. When subjects were asked to guess the makeup of the two major political parties, it turns out they were really bad at it.

SOOD: You know we asked people, hey listen, can you tell us what proportion of Democrats that are LGBT? So the average guess of people for proportion of Democrats who are LGBT is 32 percent. And the reality is that at best about 6 percent of the Democratic Party is going to be LGBT. When we ask people, can you tell us the percentage of Republicans who earn over \$250,000. Right, that's a quarter million dollars. Not too many people in America are doing that. People's average guess tends to be about 38 percent of Republicans earn this much. The reality is just about 2 percent. I think it's a nice statement to say that the big stereotype about stereotypes is that they're very common in the group. That isn't always the case. And that's certainly not the case with the parties.

PERFAS: We have these representative examples that we think about and, you know they may be a stereotypical view, but then we also think that that comes from a place of truth in the sense that they are more common in that group?

SOOD: Yes. And not just common, really common.

PERFAS: So not only are there, to use some of the examples that you use like wealth in the Republican Party, not only is that common but it's actually very common and it is almost an identifying factor for you being in that party.

SOOD: That's exactly right, exactly right. And that's also puzzling in a way, Sam, if you think about it... poor Republicans also think that. Which is just astonishing, right. So it's not just Democrats are thinking that, but poor Republicans also think that.

PERFAS: If people are so bad at guessing and we do overestimate and exaggerate the prevalence of these various stereotypes, is that a bad thing? Does that impact the political conversation or how we view each other?

SOOD: It very much does. So we ran some experiments where we also gave people, you know just the correct information about what is the true composition. And there is a little less animus towards the other party. They think that the other party is less extreme because what this is doing, exaggerating the party's stereotypical groups, is exaggerating in people's minds the differences between the two parties. So I think part of the answer is just the fact about, where are the errors happening? So one thing that we did is just, you know, how often do you watch news? We are just doing simple correlations and correlations just mean, you know people who watch more news for example, they tend to actually just be more informed. But in this particular case we find that they tend to make more errors on average. They tend to actually have greater systematic biases in how the parties are composed. That's a crazy finding because...

PERFAS: Can I repeat that? I just want make sure I understand. So the people who are the most interested in political news actually hold the most skewed perceptions, right?

SOOD: Absolutely.

PERFAS: That's insane. You'd think you'd be more informed, and you know, I think a lot of people who watch a lot of news kind of give themselves a pat on the back for being really in the know. But that's, you know, that's really surprising to me I guess.

SOOD: And that was surprising to us also. But I think it also gives you another hint that media is partly to blame, perhaps.

PERFAS: Well, and then I guess when I think about the damage that comes from this, you know it's one thing if it's like, okay I'm assuming everyone in this party is rich. But then when I think about some of the other assumptions and stereotypes that are starting to be made that are a little more personal? You know that Republicans don't care about other people. You know, or that Democrats don't care about the safety of our country. When you start to make these big assumptions, then no wonder people have so much anger and animosity towards the other person.

SOOD: I think to bring up great points Sam, and I think that is certainly part of what we imbibe in the air these days. Differences need not be, and we don't expect them to be, reasons why people dislike each other. We are all different from each other, right. We are, as people say, we are unique, right. Each person is unique, but we somehow seem to make a big fuss about certain differences and make less of a fuss about certain other differences.

PERFAS: Thinking about the differences that we perceive in the other party, do you see areas where we actually do have a lot in common with people from the other political party?

SOOD: Yeah, there's a bunch actually. So the first thing, one of the first papers that I wrote we discovered, you know, that firstly, people dislike people of the other party even more over time. But we tried to actually understand whether there is a policy basis to this affect of dislike. And there is of course a little bit. But the key finding is this humongous overlap in the policy preferences of an average Republican and the average Democrat. What defines the American polity as what I started out with, is firstly apathy. People pay very little attention to politics, far less attention than you would even imagine could be the case. And that's true for a vast vast majority of Americans.

PERFAS: So one thing that we all have in common, or that the vast majority of Americans have in common, is that politics does not define them.

SOOD: Absolutely. And secondly what defines whatever preferences they have is the middle. That is they still tend to cluster in the broad middle, rather than having two lumps on either end of the scale. And what you will find is this great overlap between Republicans and Democrats in their policy preferences. If you know so little and assume so much, right, the answer is simply stop doing that. Learn a little bit, assume a little less, and see where the conversation goes.

FRANCINE KIEFER: My name's Francine Kiefer and I've been working for the Monitor for over 30 years and I've been on the Congress beat for about five years.

PERFAS: So when people hear that you work on Capitol Hill do people assume that you hate your job?

KIEFER: Yeah they're always wondering and asking me, how can you stand it? And my reply is, I love covering Congress. Of all the areas in Washington, it has the best access to the decision makers.

PERFAS: Do you think that the media plays up the political divide in Congress or that it's pretty accurate?

KIEFER: Well, in journalism in general, journalism thrives on tension. That sort of traditionally is where the story is. So that is the natural inclination of journalists is to go where the tension is. So I think that does amplify it. I get myself sucked into that. There are lots of bipartisan things that happen that I just find, oh I don't have time to do that. That's not the main story of the week. So you know, I do try to bring something constructive to the main story of the week but often I... there's just not enough oxygen to get to some of these other things.

PERFAS: Do you think that the Congress we see makes Americans view politics more negatively in general?

KIEFER: Well, it's kind of a chicken and egg situation. You know, we have the Congress that we elect and the Congress mirrors the voters. On the other hand, members of Congress are also leaders and centrists especially, like I had a talk recently with Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota, Democrat in a red state that Trump won by a wide margin. You know she said, lawmakers need to rediscover their spine. They can't be yanked around so much by outside activist groups. So it's kind of a chicken and egg thing. We have the Congress we elect, but maybe Congress and maybe members could show a little bit more backbone.

KIEFER: I thought I would share a really interesting story. Several years ago I went out to northwest Kansas where the person that represented that district is a Republican named Tim Huelskamp. And I wanted to know, why do people support him? He is very ideological and he even got kicked off the Agricultural Committee which is like, really, someone from the farm state of Kansas is not being represented on the Agricultural Committee? He got kicked off that by then Speaker Boehner because he was too obstreperous. So I was very curious as to where his support was coming from. And interestingly, we went to a little town called Marysville near the Nebraska border and the congressman and I met up with a CEO of the biggest company in that town and that CEO was very much a community player. And so we all piled into his Lincoln SUV and as we drove around I began to see that the CEO had a very subtle message that he wanted to be giving Congressman Huelskamp. And so for instance we drove by a newly refurbished little airport and as we were driving by he said, see that airport? It was renovated recently. Of course we couldn't have done that without federal funds. Then we drove by a new state of the art rural hospital and the CEO said, see that rural hospital? Well, we couldn't have made those improvements without federal funds. And then we drove on a newly renovated road and he said to the congressman, see this road? Well, we got a federal grant to put it in last year and it created 35 jobs. He was making the point to a congressman whose main message is, you know, government is bad, that actually you need government. And what I

thought was so interesting was that this congressman lost his primary in 2016 to a more moderate Republican because of this lack of compromise. Because of this ideological rigidity.

PERFAS: What gives you the most hope for progress?

KIEFER: Lawmakers themselves are very frustrated. You have to take them at their word that they're frustrated and they don't like not being able to get things done. So you know, I find that hopeful. But I would also have to say that we really are experiencing on the Hill one of the most poisonous times. And when Susan Collins says, this is one of the most poisonous atmospheres that she can remember, that's a serious comment from someone who watches her words very carefully and who is known as a bridge builder.

PERFAS: At the time of the interview, Francine was working on a big cover story about Susan Collins for the Monitor. So she was spending a ton of time with the congresswoman and really getting some inside information and perspective. I asked Francine to share how Senator Collins feels during this time of political frustration.

KIEFER: She has said that she looks at American politics historically and we have been able to recover from these periods of great division in the past. Whether you're talking about, you know, something as huge as the Civil War or the civil rights era of the 60s, and she is convinced that the political pendulum will swing back to the middle, that these things go in waves and she thinks it will swing back to the middle. Bipartisanship does happen. It happens underneath the radar screen and it doesn't happen on Americans biggest most difficult problems. It happens on a lower level, but it's hard to find it. It's hard for those stories to break through the noise of the national level.

SUZANNE DEGGES-WHITE: Politics have always been one of those polarizing forces. There's something about political ideologies that we want to either cling to or reject.

PERFAS: Suzanne Degges-White is the chair and a professor in Counseling, Adult and Higher Education at Northern Illinois University. She's also a licensed counselor with over 20 years of experience. With so many dysfunctional political conversations going on, I thought it might be helpful to talk to someone who has a lot of experience dealing with conflict.

DEGGES-WHITE: Typically the two major parties kind of go at each other, and there's typically a lot of mudslinging. But what's happened now is the mudslinging isn't confined just to candidates slinging mud at one another. It now seems that politicians and other people feel it's OK to sling mud on the common man. I think we over personalize a lot of things and so you feel you have to choose a side when it might be an issue you really have no reason to choose a side for or against, in the grand scheme of things.

PERFAS: One article that I read in which you were quoted, you liken politics to sports teams. I was just curious, in what way? What is the analogy there?

DEGGES-WHITE: Well, the analogy is that if you've ever been sitting in the stands of a team that you really cared about, and when good things are happening, you feel good. Everyone on the same side as you feels that same positive energy. When things are going wrong, you turn into a wall of fear or a wall of support for the team. And now politics have turned into this kind of rivalry. And we see a good versus evil, this energy out there, and we feel a nationalism and an allegiance to the side we pull for. There's this idea that competition, rivalry, and a fight to the death is kind of human nature. We enjoy watching these kind of struggles. And now it's turned into what the political machine has become where it's this life and death seeming struggle where people do get polarized. We care about winning or losing rather than what's in the best interest of the most people for our country.

PERFAS: So it's interesting for me to think about, just because I grew up in the Midwest. So I grew up in a pretty conservative part of the country. But I now live on the East Coast, which is quite liberal and progressive. So my Facebook feed is a

mess.

DEGGES-WHITE: Yes, I can imagine.

PERFAS: Just opinions and people, you know, they appear to be pretty polar but what I think is interesting is that it's all people of the same perspective commenting on them. So it could be a pro-Trump post and everyone's like, yeah, hurray, Trump is amazing, followed by a post that says Trump is the worst, and everyone's like, I agree with you too. So it's just interesting for me to see kind of both those sides.

DEGGES-WHITE: Because for whatever reason we like to identify with the right side, the right team. I think about the Patriots, you're up there on the East Coast and the New England Patriots... Nobody I know likes the Patriots. We all abhor those Patriots.

PERFAS: Maybe don't say that too loud.

DEGGES-WHITE: Right, because that'll get me in hot water. It's the same thing with politicians. There's teams, there's sides. And when we see someone, if we see someone with, um, I'm from Carolina, North Carolina. So when I see something about my Tar Heels, oh yeah, go Heels, I'll break into the fight song. Do I really care that much about the Tar Heels right now? Not necessarily, but just that sense of connection and allegiance. And so when we see something that kind of reflects one of our current values or an identity that we have we get all excited, like oh like meets like, because we like to be around people who think like us. Human beings, we seek connection. That is what drives us. And so politicians, the political arena has become this place where we think that if we share a certain leaning, that those people are like us. So we build things up in our head and our Facebook feed is kind of funny because we do see, you know if you if you come from a conservative area and you ended up somewhere a liberal or if you come from somewhere liberal and end up somewhere more conservative, you can be bemused by the very polarized views that people you consider friends have. Because we conflate political identity with certain qualities that really may not be a part of that person at all.

PERFAS: I'm going to interrupt for a second because I think this point is huge. Suzanne just said we conflate political identity with certain qualities that really may not be part of that person at all. Think about that. If you're a Republican, how often do you have conversations with other Republicans and assume they'll feel the same way you do simply because they're Republican? Or even if you're a Democrat, do you assume other Democrats have the exact same values or hold the same opinion on an issue? Later in the episode we'll dig a bit more into that and how messy things get when we make these assumptions. But for now let's get back to my conversation with Suzanne. I asked her what she thought the biggest source of conflict was when we talk about politics.

DEGGES-WHITE: The biggest area of conflict I think is when people don't know enough about an issue and yet take a certain side. And when you try to reason with people who don't know enough to understand the reasons they've chosen a certain side, it's hard to break this down and have a real conversation. So I think ignorance about the issues that we seem to cling to makes it hard for us to really have productive conversations and have a place where we can come to some sort of agreement or understanding. You have to respect people even if their ideas are different because you can't get someone else's respect if you don't give them respect in return. And I think that's what's missing in the grander scheme right now is respect for people whose ideas differ from your own.

PERFAS: And I think it's also challenging yourself to respect other people's opinions. You know I mean it's very easy to be like, well, respect is earned, and I don't respect you. But you know what? I'm going to challenge myself to really try to empathize with you, to try my hardest to see where you're coming from and to allow that to kind of be the basis of my respect. Just because I respect you doesn't mean I have to agree with you.

DEGGES-WHITE: Absolutely Sam, and that's what it is. We have to respect people. As a counselor, as a parent, I don't have to necessarily like what my clients do or what my children do, but I do have to respect the fact they have the right to make

those decisions.

PERFAS: In that spirit, do you think you could ever root for the New England Patriots?

DEGGES-WHITE: You know there are times when they're playing against teams I might dislike even a little bit more. The thing here is it's a kind of that allegiance thing and you know, who knows, who knows, maybe one day, yeah, well we'll get there.

PERFAS: And you know what? I respect that.

DEGGES-WHITE: Yeah. Yeah.

GERALYN SMITH: I credit everything to Harry Potter and The Lion King.

PERFAS: Geralyn Smith is a young Democrat. When she arrived as a freshman at Notre Dame, she was randomly paired with her roommate Mimi Teixeira, a Republican. Both girls are really politically active. Which these days could be a recipe for disaster. But with these two, it resulted in a friendship deeper than either could have expected.

SMITH: Mimi and I discovered that we had so much in common. It was realizing that we might have different political leanings, but there is more to a person than what box they check on a ballot. Mimi and I both went to the University of Notre Dame. And when you're freshmen you get randomly assigned a roommate. We were, you know, nervous but excited. We were these 18 year old girls about to start college and we started decorating, of course, because we wanted our room to feel like home. And I couldn't help but notice as I looked over my shoulder, this giant poster of Ronald Reagan sitting on top of a horse. And next to the giant poster of Ronald Reagan was a giant calendar featuring Ronald Reagan. And it didn't take me too long to put two and two together. I thought, oh my roommate is a

Republican. So it was very interesting to think that I'm about to spend the next year or more with a Republican. And it actually turned out that we spent all four years together. We loved each other so much that we just had to stay together.

MIMI TEIXEIRA: What I think Geralyn and I had that was the basis of our friendship was not anything about politics at the beginning. We just like the same TV shows, the same movies, we shared faith, really important things that were other parts of who we were. And I think keeping in the forefront that there is a lot of good in every single person and that someone's political ideology is not their full or even most of their identity is a way that you can start having friends, having common bonds with people, even if you don't agree with something. That you realize that you both share something that's even bigger than your political views.

SMITH: This past presidential election we of course stayed up and we watched it. We were in the student center and when I realized where things were headed, when I realized that Hillary Clinton was going to lose, I think Mimi felt the change in me. Like I said, we were in a student center so we were surrounded by a lot of people, and she quietly leaned over and grabbed my hand. She says, Geralyn, I need you to leave. I need you to get out of here and just go find a quiet moment, a space to really just be alone, be with your thoughts and process what's happening right now. And the empathy that she showed me in that moment... number one just the fact that she could tell what I was going through without me having to say anything, and that she was able to react so quickly and she knew exactly what I needed. That is one of my most touching memories.

TEIXEIRA: There was a disagreement about a protest on campus. It was on a certain place on campus that people didn't think it was appropriate to have a protest on. There was this whole angry argument but then very very quickly devolved into some dirty terrible online debate. And I think it was the first time that I guess, maybe, I felt a wall in our friendship, but not really. It was I think the first time that Geralyn and I both recognized that our friendship isn't as easy as it always is because we have very different perspectives. And that there are reasons

that there aren't friendships like ours and it's because of the horrifying anger and division that we saw in that couple of days on campus. And we very quickly overcame it. But I think that was the first time that I realized that politics can hurt in a friendship. But that there's also ways to move past it and to gain a deeper understanding. And I would not have even close to a deep understanding of what happened in those protests across the country if I didn't have friendships that were on different sides of that issue. I think I would have just retreated into my conservative white, upper middle class friend group and never really understood.

SMITH: Like Mimi said, she learned a lot and I learned a lot from each other's experiences because I don't come from a white, middle class background. So instead of coming from a place of hurt and anger and saying well, you don't care about the things that matter to me or something like that, instead it was, help me understand where you're coming from and I'll help you understand where I'm coming from. And then once again it was just recognizing, you know, that we are not bad people.

TEIXEIRA: I think Geralyn and I both know each other well enough that we like to give each other the benefit of the doubt because I know that she's a good and loving person. And she knows the same about me.

SMITH: I think that a lot of people are falling victim to the mentality that you can't be friends with anyone from the other side of the aisle. And yes, in a sense we're missing human connection, but more importantly it's causing us to forget to see each other and forget to recognize our own humanity in the things that we do have in common.

PERFAS: It is a bit funny isn't it? That we can dig our feet in the ground so much for our own team that we don't even see the humanity in each other. A little side note: It reminds me of a Black Mirror episode that blew my mind (Season 3, Episode 5, Men on Fire. It's really good). Anyway, like Geralyn said, it takes realizing that we're not bad people and that we all want similar things. And that even statistically speaking, we overlap much more than we are divided. We are all

human. Maybe a silly thing to point out, but it's something that's often lost when we talk politics. Before we close, I thought it would be fun to take this conversation to the real world. Many of us dread having those awkward conversations around the holidays. So I posed a hypothetical scenario to Geralyn and Mimi.

PERFAS: Let's imagine that I'm home for Thanksgiving and my uncle Bob is conservative and my cousin Susie is liberal and they're talking about immigration. And my uncle, he totally supports the idea of a wall with Mexico. He is super worried about security, especially job security and crime. And my cousin she says, you know, I also want security but I think that compassion and tolerance are a higher priority right now. How do they have that conversation? How do they talk to each other without ruining Thanksgiving for everyone?

SMITH: So for me this actually isn't too hypothetical. The issue isn't immigration, but in my family there is... Every time we get together there's always some sort of heated debate going on. So it took me a moment to really answer the question because in my mind, the party's just getting started. For me I think the response would be, you know, have that argument, have that debate. Even if you guys find at the end of it, you know, you still can't see eye to eye, go back and sit down at the table because you are family, your bond is not just this one debate or this one difference of opinion. There is so much more to family. There's more to friendship. There's more to human connection than these differences of opinion. If it turns out that the uncle and the niece can't even look each other in the eye, then that means it's time for grandma to come in and force them to make up or something. Yeah, I've never shied away from conflict. I think that's just the result of my upbringing. So I don't know. For me I want to sit down with my popcorn and watch them go at it and then hug at the end of it.

TEIXEIRA: The worst thing you can do is to put someone in a category when you start getting upset. So if you're uncle is saying things that you don't agree with about immigration, it's very easy to be the person who says, well he's an old white man. He is a xenophobe and a racist. And that is where this is coming from. And

now no matter what he says, I already have in my head that all his views are coming from a bad place. And it also makes it so that when this conversation ends I leave thinking he's a bad person and a xenophobe and a racist. One, it's a cheap way to get out of a debate. So I value Geralyn's family for being able to debate. But it also is something that we do mentally that we choose to do and it will destroy not only your ability to talk about politics, but it'll destroy your relationships with people if you start putting them into boxes to try to categorize who they are based on their political views that you don't like.

PERFAS: That hypothetical Thanksgiving dinner conversation? Probably not very hypothetical for a lot of families. But I think I might have a better grasp on what it could look like to have those discussions in a healthier more productive way. Early on in the episode, Gaurav gave me some clarity around not letting the political extremes on the left or right shape my perceptions. My other big take away, which I thought was so well put by Mimi and Geralyn, is that I am so much more than a liberal or conservative and I can't let a political viewpoint on abortion or immigration become the basis of my whole identity, or the identity of anyone else I'm talking to. I think it's helpful to remember that. But hey, that's just me. You could be listening and thinking, oh Sam, it's so cute that you think it's so simple. Which is fair. I guess my thought is maybe it is that simple, or at least it could be. Whether you agree or disagree, please write in and let me know what struck you about today's conversation. You can email me at podcast@csmonitor.com.

PERFAS: And don't forget to sign up for our newsletter. You can head on over to csmonitor.com/perceptiongaps. And a little box will pop up where you can sign up. Next week, we'll dive into a subject that isn't at all controversial: guns. Please join me for a show that just might give you a whole new perception of how we approach firearms in the US.

PERFAS: We also want to give a shout out to all the people who made this possible: producer Dave Scott. Our studio engineers Morgan Anderson, Ian Blaquiere, Tory Silver and Tim Malone. Original sound design by Noel Flatt and Morgan Anderson.

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I'm Samantha Laine Perfas. Thanks for listening to Perception Gaps.

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