

Opinions

You're probably making incorrect assumptions about your opposing political party

By [Arthur C. Brooks](#)

“You know what they really want.”

As America slouches toward the 2020 presidential election, candidates and pundits will regularly tell you this about the other political side, followed by a list of its extremist beliefs, twisted motives and wicked desires.

But do you ever stop and ask how much you really know about the other side? Or whether the outrage industry in politics and media is telling you the truth about your fellow Americans who disagree with you politically? These questions are worth asking, because it turns out most of what we “know” about the other side is wrong.

Let's start with how much Republicans and Democrats actually know about the lives of people on the other side. The authors of a 2017 study in the *Journal of Politics* [revealed](#) that the average Democrat believes that more than 40 percent of Republicans earn more than \$250,000 per year. Meanwhile, Republicans believe that nearly 40 percent of Democrats are LGBTQ. How close are these estimates to reality? Not very. Just [2 percent](#) of Republicans are doing that well financially, and just 6 percent of Democrats are LGBTQ.

Getting basic facts about our neighbors this laughably wrong is pathetic enough. More alarming is the tendency to erroneously attribute extreme views and motives to the other side. The nonprofit organization More in Common recently released a [report](#) on the “Perception Gap” — the difference between what we think the “other side” believes and what they actually believe. The study found that average Democrats and Republicans radically overestimate the percentage of the other side that holds “extreme views.”

Let's take a specific example of what this means in the case of a contentious issue like immigration, which continues to roil American politics. Despite a recent ugly rally and series of tweets from the president, the data show that, in fact, a strong majority of Republicans believe that properly controlled immigration can be good for the country. They also show that a strong majority of Democrats disagree that the United States should have completely open borders. In other words, while left and right differ on immigration, those holding *extreme* views are a minority in both parties. However, Republicans think a majority of Democrats believe in open borders while Democrats think a majority of Republicans believe immigration is bad for the United States. The perception gap is 33 percentage points on each side.

And that is the perception gap for the *average* Democrat or Republican. Strong partisans — progressive activists and devoted conservatives — are most inaccurate in their perceptions of the other side, reaching more than 45 percentage points on extremely divisive issues.

But aren't strong partisans the most informed, consuming a lot of media about politics? And shouldn't all that information, well, inform? Maybe not so much. People who consume news media "most of the time" are almost three times as inaccurate in their understanding of others' views as those who consume news "only now and then," the study found. This is almost certainly a function of partisans' compulsive consumption of media sources that support their existing biases. Your political IQ is probably higher after watching reruns of "Full House" than hour after hour of political TV shows.

Heavy social-media use has the same negative effect on viewpoint accuracy. The perception gap is about 10 percentage points higher for those who have shared political content on social media in the past year than those who haven't. That isn't much of a shock. Consider, for example, that only about [22 percent](#) of U.S. adults are on Twitter, and 80 percent of the tweets come from 10 percent of users. If you rely on Twitter for political information, you are being informed by ersatz pundits (and propaganda bots) residing within 2.2 percent of the population.

Politicians — especially presidential candidates these days — make the problem worse. They play to stereotypes by saying (or tweeting) radical things to fire up fringe-view supporters, who

are numerically small but powerful in primaries. Or they tell their supporters that the other side is all a bunch of extremist kooks.

Ignorance of opponents' motives leads to needless conflict through what psychologists call "[motive attribution asymmetry](#)": the belief that *I* am motivated by love but *you* are motivated by hatred. Today, more than 90 percent of both Republicans and Democrats describe people in their own party as "honest," "reasonable" and "caring." Meanwhile, more than 80 percent in each party describe the other side as "brainwashed" and "hateful."

To be clear what that says: Millions are patently wrong about the views of those who disagree with them politically. Worse, they have hatred and contempt for the other side based on their own ignorance — classic bigotry.

That's a recipe for national decline. Sound too alarmist? Ask yourself how many of your politically ultra-opinionated friends think that the United States will be all right *even if the other side wins*. This is not to say that we don't have real ideological differences; we do. But when we exaggerate these differences, we see enemies where we should see potential allies. Motive attribution asymmetry makes us unwilling to cooperate. When we hate our neighbors, we lower our defenses against the virtual invaders who detest the United States' pluralist and classically liberal values.

This is a major threat, but also an opportunity for countercultural leaders to disrupt our dysfunctional political culture. They can do this by spending time listening to their opponents, with a goal of understanding rather than outrage. They can publicly refuse to caricature and trash people with whom they disagree. They can assume the best, not the worst, about others — which has the virtue of being closer to the truth about the majority.

Cynics will dismiss this as ridiculous; they'll say that only a "fighter" can win in politics today — which sadly means someone who fights against half of our fellow citizens. This will be the

conventional wisdom until a breakout leader reveals our hunger for unity and stands up to the outrage industry and putrid political status quo.

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