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The Monitor's View

# Who says voters are 'polarized'?

**COUNTERING EXTREMISM** A study of voters who read news articles about political polarization finds they tend to soften their views. Democracy relies less on division than a respect among fellow citizens.

By the Monitor's Editorial Board | AUGUST 16, 2016

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Before the close election for president in 2000, the American news media mostly used “polarization” to refer to sunglasses or camera lenses. Not anymore. Journalists have increasingly used the word to describe the state of partisan politics – with few people challenging this perception.

Now, however, the intense media focus on what divides Americans – rather than what unites them – has itself come under scrutiny.

A new study of American voters by Matthew Levendusky of the University of Pennsylvania and Neil Malhotra of Stanford University finds that media depiction of a divided political scene can have two effects. One, it increases a belief that the electorate is polarized, perhaps beyond the reality in

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Washington or other levels of government. And two, in a hopeful twist, this belief also helps drive voters to moderate their views away from the extremes within both political parties.

This is a welcome corrective to media overuse of “political polarization.” Rather than accept polarization as a stonecold fact, voters are falling back on the norms of independent thinking and moderation to understand opposing views.

As the two academics put it: “How journalists cover polarization shapes how citizens respond to it.”

In particular, they found that more than two-thirds of articles about polarization between 2000 and 2012 went beyond general description. The articles contained examples of uncivil or disparaging remarks about the opposition, thus helping drive polarization. The media amplified what it decried.



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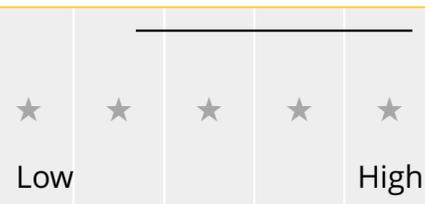
The researchers claim they are the first to document the consequences of media coverage of polarization. If so, their timing is impeccable. The 2016 presidential race needs a moment of self-reflection about the effect of media choices, in both topics and words.

Voters have learned to soften their positions amid the rising noise about how divided they are. They seek consensus and compromise when confronted with descriptions of Americans as fearful of each other’s politics. Democracy may rely on lively debate and an adversarial process. But its underlying principle is a respect and regard for one’s fellow citizens.



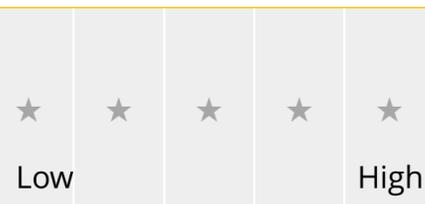
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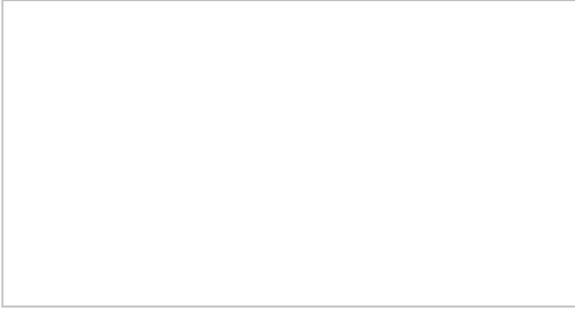
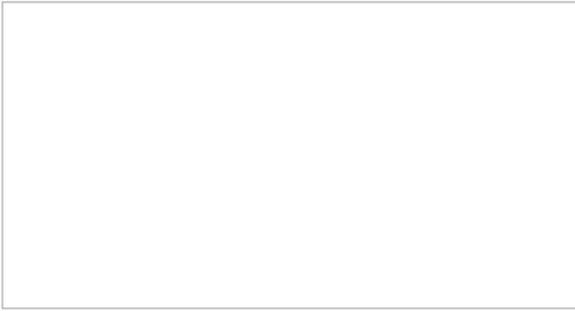
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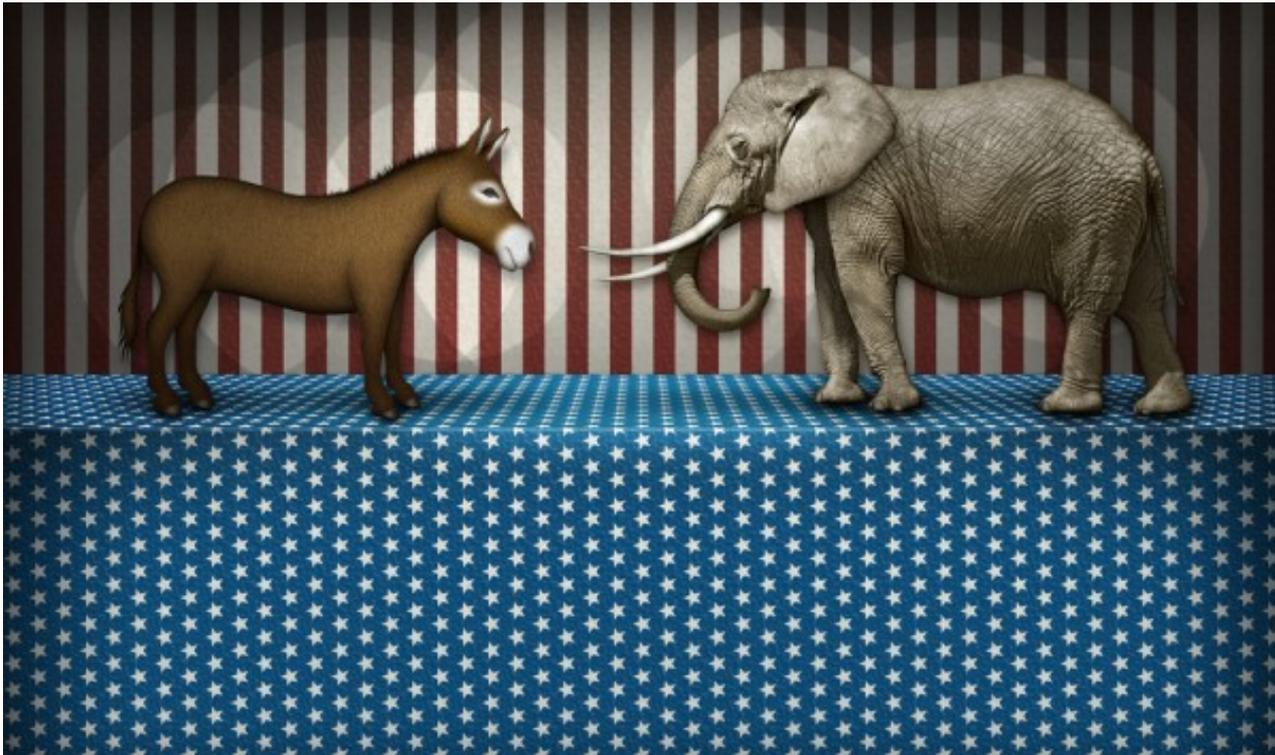
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I used to be an astrophysicist and political scientist. Now I write about science for Pacific Standar...

Nov 5, 2015 · 3 min read

# (Mis)perceiving Political Polarization

by Nathan Collins



(Photo: Jim Larkin/Shutterstock)

A lot has been written about how polarized politics is these days. The Pew Research Center [describes](#) this rift as “the vast and growing gap between liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats,” while the Brookings Institute [writes](#) that “political polarization has become embedded in American society with results that are damaging to the political process.” A decade ago, prominent political scientist [Morris Fiorina](#) found that average voters remained [fairly moderate](#) despite claims of a culture war, but since that time voters have drifted farther from the middle, perhaps because of a growing [divide](#) between the rich and poor.

In the midst of all this discussion, however, one question seems to have been lost: Do ordinary people think the country is polarized? In particular, do Americans think the general public—of which they’re a part—is more polarized than it really is? According to political scientists [Matt Levendusky](#) and [Neil Malhotra](#), the answer is yes.

## “There’s actually less distance between ordinary voters than most people think.”

Levendusky and Malhotra began their study of polarization with a survey of 510 people nationwide who’d been selected at random. Each person reported where they stood on a seven-point, liberal-to-conservative scale, and how strongly they identified with either of the two major political parties. Next, the researchers asked survey participants where they thought typical Democrats and Republicans—not political elites, but regular people who happened to support those parties—stood on issues like capital gains taxes and immigration.

As one might expect, self-identified Democrats placed themselves a bit left of center and Republicans a bit right of center—at around 3.4 and 4.5 points, respectively, on the seven-point scale. But asked where the typical Democrat or Republican sat on the scale, the numbers came out differently. On average, people thought typical Democrats would fall around 2.9 points, and Republicans around 5.1 points—roughly twice as far from the center as those same Democrats and Republicans placed themselves.

Most of that “false polarization,” as Levendusky and Malhotra call it, stemmed from Republicans and Democrats’ incorrect beliefs about each other. Democrats, for example, thought their peers in the party were just a bit left of where they actually stood. But those same Democrats thought typical Republicans were nearly a point to the right of where members of that party had placed themselves. Republicans similarly perceived Democrats as much more liberal than they really were, but were relatively accurate in their beliefs about fellow Republicans.

The results may help “point the way toward ways to mitigate polarization,” Levendusky writes in an email, such as changes in the way the media covers politics. “It also should make things like compromise and consensus easier: There’s actually less distance between ordinary voters (if not elites) than most people think.”



*Quick Studies* is an award-winning series that sheds light on new research and discoveries that change the way we look at the world.





# Study: It's the media's fault the nation is polarized

By PAUL BEDARD ([HTTP://WWW.WASHINGTONEXAMINER.COM/AUTHOR/PAUL-BEDARD](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/author/paul-bedard)) (@SECRETSBEDARD  
(//TWITTER.COM/SECRETSBEDARD)) • 8/16/16 12:16 PM

With polls showing that America is more politically divided than ever, a new study of the polarization has identified who is to blame and it's not Donald Trump or Hillary Rodham Clinton.

It's the media.

A scholarly study in the authoritative journal Political Communication (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10584609.2015.1038455?scroll=top&needAccess=true>) found that the media has harped so much on political division that the nation now feels polarized. In fact, the reporting has changed the meaning of the word "polarized," which 16 years ago referred most to sun glasses not politics.

"We find that depictions of a divided populace transmitted through the mass media can increase perceived polarization," said the study, co-authored by Matthew Levendusky of the University of Pennsylvania and Neil Malhotra of Stanford University.

"At the same time, it increases affective polarization, thereby increasing the potential for partisan discord," the duo wrote, adding that it also "heightens negative affect toward the other party."

The scholars studied news reports over 12 years and found an explosion of references to polarization in recent years. Thus, they conclude, it's the media's fault.

"How journalists cover polarization shape how citizens respond to it," they wrote.

They also found another result: Some react by becoming more moderate and compromising.

"We show how media coverage can moderate issue positions, reinforcing the idea that some voters, especially those in the center, are 'turned off' by depictions of polarized politics," said the study.

But, they concluded, "our results also make clear that polarized media coverage causes citizens to view the opposing party less positively. While we are not the first to describe and document affective polarization, we are the first to show how media coverage exogenously increases it. Our findings offer one mechanism for explaining the increased discord and disagreement seen in contemporary American politics."

In reviewing the study, Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center ([http://journalistsresource.org/studies/politics/polarization/medias-coverage-political-polarization-affects-voter-attitudes?utm\\_source=JR-email&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=JR-email&utm\\_source=Journalist%27s+Resource&utm\\_campaign=be4ea8dc3e-2015\\_Sept\\_1\\_A\\_B\\_split3\\_24\\_2015&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_12d86b1d6a-be4ea8dc3e-79641505](http://journalistsresource.org/studies/politics/polarization/medias-coverage-political-polarization-affects-voter-attitudes?utm_source=JR-email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=JR-email&utm_source=Journalist%27s+Resource&utm_campaign=be4ea8dc3e-2015_Sept_1_A_B_split3_24_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_12d86b1d6a-be4ea8dc3e-79641505)) pulled out these key takeaways:

— *Media coverage of polarization increases the belief among voters that the electorate is polarized.*

— *In response to these increased feelings that society is polarized, voters soften their own positions, seeking to compromise and see themselves as more centrist. "When media depict the mass public as polarized and divided, citizens moderate their issue positions."*

— *Amid this awareness of polarization, voters increase their dislike for those with extreme views on the opposite end of the spectrum from their own — what the authors call "affective polarization" — and come to see these voters as representative of members of the opposition party. These individuals are perceived as "violating the norms of moderation" and compromise. That leads voters to respond more viscerally and dislike members of the opposing party more on a personal level.*

- Voters respond slightly negatively to members of their own party whom they perceive to be polarizing, but far less than they do to "opposing partisans."*
- The media's discussion of political polarization has "increased dramatically" since the contested 2000 U.S. presidential election.*
- The meaning of the word "polarization" has changed, too. In 2000, it referred to political positions less than half the time; instead it often described a feature of optical lenses used in sunglasses and cameras. By 2012, it was about politics almost 80 percent of the time.*

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