



## Partisan underestimation of the polarizing influence of group discussion<sup>☆</sup>



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- In 2 experiments, groups of 4–6 like-minded participants discussed political topics.
- Group discussion polarized participants' attitudes.
- Participants misremembered pre-discussion attitudes as having been more extreme.
- Individuals underestimated the extent to which their attitudes had polarized.
- Group polarization pressures appear to be more potent than partisans realize.

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### ABSTRACT

Group polarization occurs when people's attitudes become more extreme following discussion with like-minded others. We hypothesized that people underestimate how much a relatively brief group discussion polarizes their own attitudes. People often perceive their own attitudes as unbiased and stable over time. Therefore, people's polarized post-discussion attitudes may cause them to misremember their pre-discussion attitudes as having been more extreme than they were. In two experiments, participants engaged in 15-minute discussions with 4–6 like-minded others regarding two political topics: whether Barack Obama or George W. Bush was the better president (Experiment 1) and whether they supported Barack Obama or Mitt Romney during the 2012 presidential election (Experiment 2). Group discussion polarized participants' attitudes, and participants misremembered their pre-discussion attitudes as having been more extreme than they actually were. Participants' polarized post-discussion attitudes significantly predicted their recalled pre-discussion attitudes, controlling for their actual pre-discussion attitudes, suggesting that their post-discussion attitudes guided reconstruction of their pre-discussion attitudes. These findings have implications for people's awareness of psychological biases and for the societal effects of partisan enclavement.

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In a 2010 commencement address at the University of Michigan, President Obama issued a warning about the state of public discourse in America:

If we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we become more polarized, more set in our ways. That will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2010).

President Obama's warning about the effects of group polarization is particularly trenchant at a time when Americans have become ideologically sorted (Bishop, 2008). Americans tend to socialize with, live near, and work with others who are politically like-minded (McPherson,

Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). In fact, people who believe their ideology to be out-of-sync with those living around them may actively seek out a new community that provides a better ideological match (i.e. the ideological migration hypothesis; Motyl, Iyer, Oishi, Trawalter, & Nosek, 2014). Liberals consequently have greater social contact with other liberals, conservatives have greater social contact with other conservatives, and this ideological enclavement may have contributed to increased political polarization in the United States (Schkade, Sunstein, & Hastie, 2007; Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers, & Judd, 2015).

Group polarization occurs when people's attitudes become more extreme following discussions with like-minded others (Isenberg, 1986; Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969; Myers & Lamm, 1976; Stoner, 1968; Sunstein, 2009). For example, in a study that examined group polarization of contemporary partisan attitudes, researchers asked liberal and conservative community members in Boulder and Colorado Springs, Colo., respectively, to discuss three partisan topics for 15 min: environmental policy to reduce greenhouse gases, civil unions for gay and

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lesbian Americans, and affirmative action (Schkade et al., 2007). Partisans' private attitudes became more extreme following the discussion: Boulder liberals held more liberal attitudes and Colorado Springs conservatives held more conservative stances. Such findings lend credence to President Obama's warnings about politician polarization.<sup>1</sup>

Group polarization is determined, broadly, by two sets of processes (Isenberg, 1986; Myers & Lamm, 1976; Sunstein, 2002, 2009). Informationally, the ideological slant of information presented in group discussion tends to reflect the group's initial leanings (Sunstein, 2009). During discussion, the predominance of new and repeated persuasive arguments on one side will begin to overwhelm remaining—and likely unspoken (Isenberg, 1986)—arguments on the other side, steering group members toward more extreme attitudes (Kaplan, 1977; Vinokur & Burnstein, 1978). Socially, as the emerging group view becomes clear, partisans' concerns with social comparisons—their desire to fit the valued group's norm—can lead more moderate individuals to endorse extreme views (Hogg, Turner, & Davidson, 1990; McGarty, Turner, Hogg, David, & Wetherell, 1992). Social concerns may also lead partisans to espouse more extreme stances as a way of “one-upping” others in the group and adhering to dominant group norms (Pruitt, 1971; Sunstein, 2009). Both informational and social processes entail repeated exposure to corroborating information (Myers, 1978; Pruitt, 1971), and repeated attitude expression (Brauer, Judd, & Gliner, 1995), which can both polarize attitudes.

We examine how much people are aware that group discussion with like-minded others polarizes their own partisan attitudes. If people fully recognize how much group discussion polarizes their attitudes, they are well equipped to make informed choices, such as weighing the polarizing effects of enclavement against the potential benefits of an ideologically congruent community (Motyl et al., 2014). But, if people underestimate how much group discussion polarizes their attitudes, they are ill equipped to make informed decisions about the polarizing effects of enclavement.

Given the frequency with which people engage in discussions with like-minded others, and the blatant processes that polarize group members, people might be keenly aware that group discussion polarizes their own attitudes. For example, a Boulder liberal who is moderately supportive of carbon-reducing initiatives might learn more about climate change from other liberals and explicitly become more strident in support of environmental policies. Yet, we hypothesize that people underestimate how much group discussion polarizes their own partisan attitudes, even when their attitudes have just recently polarized.

We derive our hypothesis from two broad psychological principles. First, although people's political attitudes are highly constructive (Lord & Lepper, 1999; Lodge, McGraw, & Stroh, 1989; Schwarz, 2007; Zaller & Feldman, 1992)—reflecting the particular constellation of available information, social context, and motivational considerations that are present at the time—people regard their own attitudes as objective, unbiased, realistic evaluations of the world “as it is” (Griffin & Ross, 1991; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). For example, even though people's attitudes toward policies are actually strongly swayed by the partisan framing of a policy, people believe that their attitudes result from careful consideration of the available evidence (Cohen, 2003; Pronin, Berger, & Molouki, 2007). People's blindness to contextual influences on their own attitudes implies that they may underestimate how much group discussion polarizes their attitudes.

The second psychological principle is that people's reconstructive memory is strongly influenced by their current attitudes (Levine, 1997; Levine & Safer, 2002; Schwarz, 2007) and their implicit theories about attitude stability over time (Bem, 1972; Ross, 1989). Because people typically believe that attitudes are stable, people whose attitudes have changed tend to reconstruct their previous attitudes as having

been consistent with their current attitudes (Bem & McConnell, 1970; Goethals & Reckman, 1973; Levine, 1997; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

Previous research suggests that attitudes newly formed through group discussion may influence estimates of previous attitudes. Goethals and Reckman (1973) asked groups of high school students to discuss the issue of bussing to desegregate schools, a highly controversial topic. Discussion groups included a confederate who, armed with a set of compelling and confrontational arguments, reversed discussants' attitudes toward bussing. Afterward, discussants recalled their pre-discussion attitudes as having been more consistent with their (newly) reversed post-discussion attitudes than they actually were. Although consistent with our hypotheses, this study differed from our experiments in that discussants in the Goethals and Reckman study reversed the direction of their attitudes, which might have created particularly strong motives for people to misremember their initial attitudes. Further, our investigation concerns polarization resulting from emergent properties of group discussion, rather than attitude change resulting from a compelling, and well-informed, experimental confederate.

In two experiments, we tested whether partisans underestimate the effect of group polarization on their own attitudes. We asked groups of like-minded partisans to discuss whether Barack Obama was a better president than George W. Bush (Experiment 1) and whether they supported Barack Obama or Mitt Romney for president in 2012 (Experiment 2). We expected group discussion to polarize participants' attitudes. More importantly, we predicted that participants would underestimate how much their attitudes had changed, misremembering their pre-discussion attitudes as more polarized than they actually were. In both experiments, we also tested whether people's recollections of their pre-discussion attitudes were significantly predicted by their post-discussion attitudes, controlling for their actual pre-discussion attitudes, as might be expected based on the attitude reconstruction explanation.

## 1. Experiment 1: Obama vs. Bush

### 1.1. Method

Eighty undergraduates at the University of Colorado Boulder (74% female) participated in eight sessions yielding 16 groups ranging in size from 4 to 6 students. We asked people to discuss with like-minded others whether Barack Obama or George W. Bush was the better president. Eleven groups comprised partisans who preferred Obama; 5 groups comprised partisans who preferred Bush. We conducted the study between mid-September and October 2011, before the 2012 presidential campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Participants first completed a questionnaire that, in addition to basic demographic information, asked them to consider the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama and to indicate who they thought was the better president. Participants expressed their opinion by selecting which president they believed was the better one and by drawing a slash through a 15.8 cm line that ranged from *Barack Obama is much better* (0 cm) to *Neutral/neither* (7.9 cm) to *George W. Bush is much better* (15.8 cm). The experimenter used these responses to divide the larger group into two like-minded groups of 4 to 6 participants, usually into an “Obama” group and a “Bush” group.

The experimenter escorted groups to separate rooms, seated them around a table, and informed them that everyone in their group preferred the same president and the other group (or a group convened earlier in the day, for single groups) preferred the other president. The experimenter instructed groups to spend 15 min discussing why their preferred president performed better on the economy and foreign

<sup>1</sup> Although he did not use proper APA citation style, we suspect that Obama's remarks were informed by the results of the Colorado study, given that one of the co-authors, Cass Sunstein, was then a member of the Obama administration.

<sup>2</sup> Our sample size was determined by the available recruiting window, from the time the department research participant pool opened in mid-September through the end of the extra credit deadline in late October.

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