

Decision Processes Colloquium

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Perceiving Political Polarization: The Exacerbating Influence of Identity, Anger, and Egocentrism

Why are some people particularly inclined to see sharp political divides between Americans? This talk will examine three factors that exacerbate perceptions of political polarization. First, data from the American National Election Study, comprising approximately 40,000 respondents from 1970–2004, demonstrate that the strength of people’s personal partisan identification predicts perceived political polarization. Second, field experiments following two national tragedies (Hurricane Katrina and the Gabrielle Giffords shooting) indicate that anger—an emotion associated with intergroup threat—exacerbates the association between personal partisan identification and perceived political polarization. Among people who are made incidentally angry, compared with those made incidentally sad or those in a control condition, strength of partisan identification is more strongly predictive of perceived political polarization. Finally, field studies during the 2008 Presidential election and laboratory studies regarding a hypothetical university policy indicate that people egocentrically project their own attitude extremity onto others. People with more extreme attitudes perceive more polarization than do people with less extreme attitudes. This “polarization projection” is simultaneous with and independent of the tendency for people to assume that others share their political attitudes. Implications for civic behavior, and for accuracy and error in political judgment are discussed.