Polarization blindness:

Underestimating the effect of group discussion on political polarization

Jessica Keating

This research examines people's awareness of group polarization pressures on themselves and on others. Short discussions of political issues with similarly-minded others increase the extremity of group members' attitudes, thereby increasing political polarization. People's limited awareness of what shapes their own attitudes implies that people may underestimate the polarizing effect of group discussions, even when their own attitudes have recently polarized. In two studies, participants engaged in 15-minute discussions with 4-6 like-minded others regarding two political topics, whether Barack Obama or George W. Bush are the better president (Study 1) and support for Barack Obama or Mitt Romney during the 2012 presidential election (Study 2). Group discussion polarized participants' attitudes, and participants underestimated how much their attitudes had polarized. They misremembered their pre-discussion attitudes as being more consistent with their post-discussion attitudes than they actually were. Thus, people may be unaware of how much being in politically like-minded groups polarizes their own attitudes.