

Extreme Political Attitudes May Stem From an Illusion of Understanding

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Having to explain how a political policy works leads people to express less extreme attitudes toward the policy, according to new research published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

The research suggests that people may hold extreme policy positions because they are under an illusion of understanding — attempting to explain the nuts and bolts of how a policy works forces them to acknowledge that they don't know as much about the policy as they initially thought.

Psychological scientist Philip Fernbach of the Leeds School of Business at the University of Colorado, Boulder and his co-authors were interested in exploring some of the factors that could contribute to what they see as increasing political polarization in the United States.

“We wanted to know how it's possible that people can maintain such strong positions on issues that are so complex — such as macroeconomics, health care, foreign relations — and yet seem to be so ill-informed about those issues,” says Fernbach.

Drawing on previous research on the illusion of understanding, Fernbach and colleagues speculated that one reason for the apparent paradox may be that voters think they understand how policies work better than they actually do.

In their first study, the researchers asked participants taking an online survey to rate how well they understood six political policies, including raising the retirement age for Social Security, instituting a national flat tax, and implementing merit-based pay for teachers. The participants were randomly assigned to explain two of the policies and then asked to re-rate how well they understood the policies.

As the researchers predicted, people reported lower understanding of all six policies after they had to explain them, and their positions on the policies were less extreme. In fact, the data showed that the more people's understanding decreased, the more uncertain they were about the position, and the less extreme their position was in the end.

The act of explaining also affected participants' behavior. People who initially held a strong position softened their position after having to explain it, making them less likely to donate bonus money to a related organization when they were given the opportunity to do so.

Importantly, the results affected people along the whole political spectrum, from self-identified Democrats to Republicans to Independents.

According to the researchers, these findings shed light on a psychological process that may help people

to open the lines of communication in the context of a heated debate or negotiation.

“This research is important because political polarization is hard to combat,” says Fernbach. “There are many psychological processes that act to create greater extremism and polarization, but this is a rare case where asking people to attempt to explain makes them back off their extreme positions.”

In addition to Fernbach, co-authors include Todd Rogers of the Harvard Kennedy School; Craig R. Fox of the University of California, Los Angeles; and Steven A. Sloman of Brown University.