

'Preaching to the Choir': A New Theory on Why American Politics are So Polarized

There is an enormous body of research out there that explores why modern American politics are so polarized.

It's also a question many Americans are asking. (The question comes up second on Google if one types in "Why is American politics...".)

There are many good theories out there. Bill Bishop's "[big sort](#)" [hypothesis](#) suggests Americans are subconsciously segregating into ideological enclaves. [Jon Haidt and Sam Abrams offer 10 reasons](#), including racial/ethnic divisions and the ideological purification of America's two major parties. The [growing split](#) between urban-rural communities received an avalanche of attention following Donald Trump's surprising electoral upset. Political scientist Charles Murray [says](#) the polarization is a product of the collapse on constitutional restraints on the federal government, which allow political parties "to enact policies that deeply offend the other side."

A less-known theory [recently was posited](#) by professors [David E. Broockman](#) of University of California-Berkeley and [Timothy J. Ryan](#) of the University of North Carolina.

The Broockman-Ryan hypothesis—we'll call it the "preaching to the choir" effect—suggests that politicians tend to become more polarized because the vast majority of interaction they have with constituents involves partisans in their own respective political parties.

While previous research has suggested citizens often filter out political opinions that run counter to their own assumptions and beliefs, Broockman and Ryan dug into the

effect this political isolation has on *politicians*. As it turns out, citizens rarely communicate with politicians outside their own party affiliation.

“Citizens prefer to preach to the choir, contacting legislators likely to already agree with them,” the authors state.

The result? Partisan voters are making politicians more polarized. Brookman and Ryan explain:

“...politicians appear to turn to citizen contact in choosing their issue positions and deciding how to allocate their time. Our findings suggest that politicians turning to such contact will hear disproportionately from citizens likely to reward party orthodoxy than from those who might encourage moderation. Along with work showing that the citizens most likely to contact their representatives tend to have the most polarized views (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995), our results highlight how a persistent bias in how citizens express their views reinforces elite polarization.”

The theory makes sense.

Although Brookman and Ryan say that “It might seem natural to expect that citizens would be most eager to contact politicians of the opposite party, with whom they are likeliest to disagree on policy,” it seems intuitive to me that the opposite is true.

The average person today is highly-opinionated but intellectually insecure, which means they are likely to seek out audiences sympathetic to their messages. People don't like being challenged. (These people, I suspect, are also likely to see politicians as people on “their team,” and thus obligated to support the team's positions.)

But whether it's intuitive or not is not really the point.

Broockman and Ryan provide empirical evidence of the phenomenon. Their findings suggest that politicians are receiving a skewed picture of their constituencies, and this is shaping and hardening their own political positions and opinions.

The good news? The authors point out that the best way to correct bias in decision-making and behavior is to be aware of that the bias exists in the first place. (The authors point to studies that show referees adjusted their behavior after they became aware of racial bias in their calls.) This is something their research should help achieve.

The research also holds an important lesson for the general public, one we've been known to stress at Intellectual Takeout: challenge your ideas.

Practice dialectic. Calmly and rationally engage with people whose views differ from your own. Be civil, listen to what they have to say. Tolerate their ideas even if you choose not to adopt them. This is not only healthy, it will make one look more intelligent and educated.

As Solzhenitsyn said, "It's a universal law—intolerance is the first sign of an inadequate education."

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[Image Credit: [CNN](#)]