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Perceived Public Opinion vs. Actual Public Opinion and Media’s Influence

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the extent of polarization in the United States in the current political climate. It was predicted that individual beliefs would be less polarized than news media makes it seem because while the political parties are moving further toward the poles, there is no evidence to suggest that individuals are doing the same. Using Berkeley’s Survey Documentation and Analysis tool, data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) was analyzed to test this premise. The ANES measured individuals’ party identification. The analysis focused on those who identify as Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. The survey then asked those same individuals how they felt about a number of political issues. Six issues were chosen that are considered a priority to voters (gun control, gay marriage, federal welfare spending, building a wall with Mexico, Syrian Refugees, and affirmative action). Cross-tabulations were conducted to examine the differences in issue positions across party identification expecting those differences to be smaller than the popularly perceived polarization. Further, twenty undergraduate students in a political science course were asked to guess how they thought people responded to the survey. The evidence shows that perceived public opinion is often inaccurate compared to actual public opinion. On some issues, ANES respondents answered very closely to how one might expect based on the beliefs of the political parties, but on other issues their answers were very different. The students also often over or underestimated responses to certain issues and those estimates tended to fall in line with how one might expect a Democrat or Republican to respond.
INTRODUCTION

Today, Americans seem more polarized than ever before. It feels as if individuals are unable to reach common ground with those who hold opposing beliefs. Extant literature suggests that the internet is a primary contributor to this polarization (see Gainous and Wagner 2014), and while this won’t be examined specifically, it does provide insight to the polarization being examined. This research is more concerned with whether this polarization is real or perceived, and with the potential consequences that follow. This research began by examining whether public opinion is actually more polarized now than in the past. Then the task remained to determine whether individuals’ public opinions align with what people expect public opinion to look like. This research sought to reveal if public opinion is polarized because people have started to believe more extreme beliefs, or if public opinion merely appears to be more polarized.

Polarization creates numerous impediments for a well-functioning democratic society. It creates policy gridlock, degrades the ability to hold productive public conversations, and weakens intellect by leading to distorted thinking, all of which stagnate society. While polarization is most visible among politicians, their actions are mainly just reflective of the trends among the electorate. It can be said with certainty that polarization is problematic, and something should be done about it, but the question remains: what is there to do? While this research does not answer that question specifically, hopefully it shows that the level of perceived polarization is actually higher than actual polarization. This may offer some hope regarding potential solutions to polarization. If public opinion is not as polarized as it seems, maybe then more can be accomplished both legislatively and individually.
This paper, firstly, examines public opinion based on survey respondents’ answers to the American National Election Studies. The responses to the ANES survey were analyzed and it was determined whether the answers appear to be polarized or not. Simply, the size of the differences in opinion on issue 1, issue 2, etc. across party identification were measured.

Secondly, a group of students were asked to guess where they thought both Democrats and Republicans in the ANES would fall on each of these issues. The intent was to see if students estimated higher polarization than is actually present in the ANES. If so, this provides evidence, albeit from a limited sample, that perceived polarization may be stronger than actual issue polarization. While many ANES survey respondents answered the questions according to their political affiliation, it was predicted that many respondents would go against their party when answering the questions. Meaning that some Democrats would answer conservatively on some issues and some Republicans would answer liberally on some issues. Then, when asked to guess where public opinion stood on an issue, it was hypothesized that students would attribute larger percentages to traditionally “Democrat” or traditionally “Republican” beliefs. Meaning that students would guess that more Democrats fall in the liberal answer for a question and they would also guess that more Republicans would fall in the conservative answer for a question.

The results of this research are mixed. For some issues, the students’ guesses were fairly accurate but some were significantly inaccurate. When the students were asked to guess how they think people felt about certain issues, they almost always overestimated the percentages of polarized beliefs for Democrats but often underestimated the polarized results for Republicans. The results overall support the idea that perceived polarization is not accurate compared to actual polarization. In the discussion section of this paper, why this may occur will be addressed.

People may perceive that public opinion is more polarized than private opinion because
politicians are much more divided then they have been in the past. It may also occur because those with extreme political beliefs tend to be more vocal and active politically (Pew Research Center 2014). Another reason may be that individuals misrepresent their private preferences based on social pressures and the utility they get from expressing a certain belief that may conflict with their own (Kuran 1995). This cause can also turn into a consequence: if an individual is around multiple people that are misrepresenting their true preferences, they may do the same due to social pressure. This paper will subsequently address the literature that provides the foundation for the hypotheses and necessary background information, then the results and a discussion will follow.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

*Partisanship*

When examining political parties and individuals’ party identification, we know that people don’t seem to hold ideological beliefs, their opinions are, at best, random (Converse 1964). People don’t interpret politics through an ideological lens, most simply choose random answers. Converse found that over time, individuals’ answers to open-ended survey questions would change with no indication of a change in beliefs. Individuals also don’t seem to understand Democratic ideology or Republican ideology however, many vote according to a party identification that they’ve inherited psychologically from their parents. People then develop their beliefs through that lens. The issues rarely factor into people’s decisions (Campbell et al. 1960). In regard to evaluating the opposing party, people rarely base their evaluations on ideological issues, but rather on symbols. Certain symbols are associated with the Democratic party and others are associated with the Republican party and people evaluate the party based on how they feel about the symbols associated with them (Conover & Feldman 1981). People also
determine how those similar to them identify and then identify with the same party. So these symbols that represent the parties are a larger determining factor in party identification than the issues themselves. Conover and Feldman determined that evaluations of Democrats and Republicans are not necessarily negatively correlated, but Pew Research Center has found within recent years that Democrats and Republicans have become increasingly hostile towards each other and attitudes among both have gone past disliking each other. An increasing number of people on both sides see the opposing party as a threat to the nation’s well-being. These types of attitudes threaten Congress’ ability to get things done which in turn incentivizes presidents to use more executive orders (Deering & Maltzman 1999).

The major cultural shift of the 1960’s contributed to this increasing partisanship. Both parties began to redefine themselves. The sixties marked an end to an era of innocence about politics and gave rise to cynicism and a severe distrust of the opposing party (Walsh 2010). It was a time of political extremism and politics were no exception. People were no longer “pro-Democrat” or “pro-Republican” but now they were “pro-Democrat and anti-Republican” or “pro-Republican and anti-Democrat”.

_Polarization_

This increase in hostility towards opposing sides leads to polarization. The question remaining however, is whether or not this polarization occurs among individuals, or just among the political elites such as government officials, journalists, and politicians. Fiorina and Abrams (2008) argue that there has been little change in the distribution of responses over the past three decades meaning that there has been little or no increase in polarization among the American public. Abramowitz (2010) argues that Fiorina and Abrams’ claim ignores the most important changes in American public opinion: the growing consistency of American’s opinions across
different issues as well as between their issue positions and their party identification. However, Fiorina and Abrams (2008) say that there has been an increase in party sorting meaning an increased correlation between issue positions and party identification. Consistency among opinions doesn’t necessarily mean that overall public opinion is more polar. Conover and Feldman (1981) might argue that as people continue to sort themselves into parties based on who they are most similar to, they are also expressing similar beliefs whether they are educated on those issues or not. Timur Kuran (1995) would argue that increased party sorting causes people to express more consistent partisan beliefs based on the social pressure to do so (this theory will be elaborated on further in the Public Opinion section). People are more polarized, not in their policy preferences, but in their attitudes towards each other. Democrats and Republicans increasingly don’t like each other and have no trust in government run by the opposing party (Hetherington & Rudolph 2015). Polarization is especially problematic because it usually means increased policy gridlock (Binder 1999, Jones 2001) which leads to decreased policy innovation and a reduced ability to adapt to economic, social, or demographic changes.

It is argued in this paper that the perception of polarization in public opinion is more pronounced than the actual polarization of public opinion. Media frequently influences and sometimes drives individual attitudes (Campante & Hojman 2013, Chadwick 2013). The introduction of broadcast television is associated with a decrease in ideological polarization due to very few channels equating to very little variety in content. FCC regulations and market-driven choices provided very similar content on each network that was middle-of-the-road and moderate. As more channels became available, Campante & Hojman suggest that this content differentiation likely contributed to more recent polarization. As time went on, proliferation of media choices over the next 30 years caused further polarization (Prior 2005). The introduction
of the internet only intensified this phenomenon as more and more people were now able to access the political information flow. Individuals, not just political elites, could share their opinions to large numbers of people. However, the internet poses a unique problem in that it allowed people to control what they do and do not see. People can, and do, customize the content they see, effectively reducing the chances of seeing opposing views. This could also mean avoiding politics altogether (Sunstein 2017). These “echo chambers” in which individuals typically only see the content they prefer, leads to a considerable knowledge gap between the politically involved and politically apathetic. This knowledge gap is far greater than socioeconomic knowledge gaps (Prior 2005). In low-choice broadcast systems, such as the early days of television, many ended up watching the news because the choices were limited. This “accidental exposure” is far less likely in a system with infinitely many choices. Further, among those that do use the internet to access political content, increased consumption of digital information can lead to greater degrees of attitude extremity (Gainous & Wagner 2015). As Sunstein (2017) and Prior (2005) suggest, the more an individual consumes digital information, the more they tailor that consumption to preferable content, the more likely it is for an individual’s attitude to shift towards the extreme.

Public Opinion

Polarization changes the way citizens form opinions in that it stimulates partisan motivated reasoning which means decision making relies more on partisan endorsements than substantive arguments (Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus 2013). When examining public opinion, it must first be acknowledged that there is both actual public opinion and perceived public opinion. Further, individuals hold both private and public preferences. Private preference is an individual’s true stance on an issue while public preference is the opinion they express to others.
Timur Kuran (1995) refers to this disconnect in preferences as *preference falsification*. While it is possible for both preferences to be the same, an individual’s public preference often differs from their private preference depending on the social pressures they perceive. It is important to note that preference falsification is not the same as lying. A person may express a different preference to maximize their utility, meaning that they may perceive the benefits of expressing a different preference to be greater than expressing their true preference. People don’t necessarily have to lie to falsify their preferences, sometimes it means staying quiet or laughing at a joke that goes against your private preference.

Often, even just believing that a certain belief is held by the majority, when it really isn’t, can drive the majority to actually hold that belief. Kuran cites a study from the 1970’s in which only 18% of whites supported forced racial segregation but 47% thought that *most* did so. The study found that “although few whites favored enforced racial segregation, many were willing to endorse it in the mistaken belief that most whites were segregationists” (Kuran 1995, Gorman 1975). This implies that those who hold moderate, “middle” beliefs often publicly claim more extreme beliefs because they think that that is what the majority believes. Kuran does acknowledge that there are people who often go against social pressure for the sole purpose of going against the “status quo”. However, he explains that those people who try to challenge the status quo are an exception to the rule and thus not the focus of this paper. He also explains that if public opinion were examined on a graph, we could put expected public opinion on the X axis and actual public opinion on the Y axis with a line starting from the (0,0) point with a slope of y=x. Intersecting that line at various points is a propagation curve. At each intersection there is equilibrium where actual public opinion equals expected public opinion. When we are not at equilibrium we are at some point on the propagation curve where actual public opinion does not
equal expected public opinion; social pressures will drive public opinion toward a more extreme equilibrium. Kuran’s research provides a solid foundation for why perceived polarization may differ from actual polarization. The argument of this paper is that perceived polarization is more dramatic than actual polarization. So, individuals’ public preferences are more extreme than their private preferences.

Misinterpretation of public opinion can happen for a number of reasons. Media may contribute by displaying snap polls that are biased due to immense pressure to create “fresh” content (Chadwick 2013). Non-elite actors are more visible in the political information flow meaning that the information disseminated is not vetted through traditional journalistic standards (Chadwick 2013). The information seen online may or may not be distorted, including information on public opinion. Coming back to the argument made by Campbell et al. (1960) that individuals answers to survey questions were essentially random in their variation over time, its more likely that the reason for these changes is that individuals adjust their answers based on new “considerations” that are mentally accessible at the moment. These considerations are often influenced by messages heard from the media and politically elite. So what and how the public thinks about politics is influenced by the political elites (Zaller 1992).

*Media Bias and the Issues of Focus*

To create a basis for why individuals appear more polarized, and thus why individuals might misperceive public opinion, the current media system must first be examined. Mass Communications theory explains that basic theory of framing “suggests that how something is presented to the audience influences the choices people make about how to process that information” (Davie, n.d.). There are two primary frameworks within framing theory: natural and social (Goffman 1974). Natural frameworks are simply physical occurrences while social
frameworks are built on natural frameworks but focus on the social causation of events such as
the manipulation of other people. These frameworks how people interpret data and then use these
frameworks to make decisions (Goffman 1974).

Framing theory is often coupled with the Agenda Setting theory which says that media
drives the agenda by influencing how much importance people attribute to issues based on media
coverage (McCombs & Shaw 1972). Framing theory goes on to say that how the coverage is
presented shapes how individuals think about that issue, i.e. journalists create a frame for the
issue and then present it that way and this frame influences how individuals perceive the issue.
From there it is necessary to determine if this framing by media has become biased. Tim
Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo conducted a study in which they measured media bias among
several major media outlets and found that there is a strong bias among most major news outlets.
Groseclose and Milyo assigned scores to the major news outlets to determine their level of bias.
Scores left of the center, or anywhere from 0-50.1, indicate a conservative bias, while scores to
the right, or anywhere from 50.2-100, indicate a liberal bias. Groseclose and Milyo determined
that the Wall Street Journal was the most liberally biased news outlet (among those observed)
and the Washington Times was the most conservatively biased news outlet (among those
observed). These news outlets will be examined to determine what frames are attached to certain
issues. These issues will be determined by examining what issues were most important to voters
and then which of those issues could be adequately examined.

To elaborate, in 2016, Pew Research Center determined the most important issues to
voters in the 2016 presidential election. To determine these issues, Pew Research Center
calculated which issues the most people said were “very important” to their votes. The top issues
listed in order of highest percentage of people to the lowest are as follows: economy, terrorism,
foreign policy, health care, gun policy, immigration, social security, education, Supreme Court appointments, treatment of racial, ethnic minorities, trade policy, environment, abortion, and treatment of gay/lesbian/transgender people. This list was then used as a guide to determine what issues to examine in this paper. When looking at the ANES information, questions were chosen that could adequately and succinctly be analyzed in a table but that also fit into a category mentioned on the list from Pew Research Center. It was also necessary to ensure that the issues chosen could be clearly organized in such a way that people could then be asked to guess the values in each category. The issues chosen were: gun control, gay marriage, federal welfare spending, building a wall with Mexico, Syrian refugees, and affirmative action. Each issue will be addressed individually to assess how the issue has been framed in the media.

Before discussing the aforementioned issues in depth, it is necessary to take the time to briefly define each party’s platform for clarity when determining the frame attached to an issue. The Republican Party’s platform was ascertained from the GOP’s website: GOP.com. The Republican Party says marriage should be between one man and one woman, they support gun rights and oppose laws that restrict access to guns, they oppose abortion, and support lower taxes. Republicans also tend to interpret the constitution strictly. The Democratic Party’s platform was also ascertained from their website: Democrats.org. The Democratic Party supports gun laws restricting access to firearms, they advocate for the rights of gays/lesbians/transgender people, they support a woman’s right to choose abortion, and support aid to the poor. Democrats tend to see the constitution as a document that should be adapted to modern times. Finally, when determining the hypotheses, the biases found and described served as the baseline for public opinion amongst Democrats and Republicans. Therefore, to determine whether students
misperceived public opinion, it was hypothesized that students would assume that public opinion amongst Democrats and Republicans followed this baseline.

**Gun Control**

To determine how the issue of gun control has been framed in the media, headlines from both the Wall Street Journal and the Washington times will be analyzed. The Wall Street Journal portrays gun control as a much needed policy. Headlines address the issue as a “public health crisis” and claim that in the aftermath of mass shootings “Democrats Plan to Pursue Most Aggressive Gun-Control Legislation in Decades”. Stories and headlines such as these suggest that gun control is typically supported by members on the left. The Washington Times however portrays gun control differently. One headline reads: “Gun Control Advocates Fund Abortion Midterm Ads” associating gun control with abortion, something conservatives are adamantly against. Other stories detail how a certain store has lost business due to supporting gun control or a school has experienced political fallout for supporting gun control. Stories like these give gun control a negative connotation. Based on these biases, it was hypothesized that students will overestimate the percentage of Democrats that think it should be more difficult to get a gun. It was also hypothesized that students will overestimate the percentage of Republicans that think it should be easier to get a gun.

**Gay Marriage**

When examining the Wall Street Journal’s framing of gay rights, one story calls a ruling that gay sex isn’t a crime a “victory” for millions. Another story explains that liberals are worried that the appointment of a conservative Supreme Court justice may threaten rulings in favor of gay rights. These stories indicate that liberals are typically associated with gay rights. When looking at the Washington Times, the stories have a different tone. One story explains that
“typical gay liberals decide to publicly bully Christians because of their faith”. This story in particular not only associates liberals with gay individuals but also portrays gays in a negative way. Another story details how states are not done fighting a Supreme Court ruling in favor of gay marriage and Republicans tend to support states’ rights to act independently. Relying on these social frameworks, it was hypothesized that students would overestimate the percentage of Democrats that support full marriage rights for gays and lesbians. It was also hypothesized that students would underestimate the percentage of Republicans that support full marriage rights for gays and lesbians.

Federal Welfare Spending

This section addresses welfare policies in general. Looking first to the Wall Street Journal, federally funded welfare programs are portrayed in a much more positive light. One story is quite compassionate in detailing how “housing-voucher recipients get help moving to better neighborhoods”. Another thanks federal efforts for getting veterans off the streets. These stories make federally funded welfare programs sound like a positive thing and when this view comes from a liberally biased source it can be inferred that liberals might tend to also see federally funded welfare programs as a positive. On the other hand, the Washington Times take another approach: painting welfare in a negative light and suggesting that system needs to be reformed. One story claims that welfare programs are poorly managed and don’t fulfill their goals while another says that conservative leaders have pushed for welfare system reforms that include rolling back aid. Another story calls welfare the “liberal war on work”. This story not only paints welfare negatively but also associates the negative thing with liberal policies. Drawing from the biases discussed above it was hypothesized that students will overestimate the percentage of Democrats that support increasing federal welfare spending. It was also
hypothesized that students will overestimate the percentage of Republicans that support decreasing federal welfare spending.

*Building a Wall with Mexico and Immigration*

In discussing the issue, stories that address building a wall with Mexico will be discussed as well as stories about general immigration. The Wall Street Journal published a story saying that immigration to the US takes courage, something that is a part of the country’s DNA. This story portrays immigration positively, by saying that immigrants show courage and courage is a part of the US’s genetic makeup. Another story details ways for migrants to ease their entry into the US and a third calls the border wall a “wasteful political stunt”. So the Wall Street Journal has effectively painted immigration in a positive light and condemned the border wall. The Washington Times however tells a different story. One story claims that “half of immigrant-led households collect welfare” equating migrants with another thing that the news outlet has portrayed negatively. Along the same lines, another story insists that immigrants are avoiding the workforce and turning to welfare despite earning better educations. So the Washington Times has used one negative thing (welfare) to imply that this other thing (immigrants) is also negative by association. Based on these biases, it was hypothesized that students would overestimate the percentage of Democrats that opposed the wall. It was also hypothesized that students would overestimate the percentage of Republicans that favor the wall.

*Syrian Refugees*

Surprisingly, the Wall Street Journal offers very few stories on this subject. No stories are offered discussing allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US and only around twenty stories mentioning the crisis in Syria are offered. The stories that are published mainly focus on developments in the civil war occurring. However, the Washington Times list ten pages of
stories, many of which address the question of allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US. Most of these stories imply that allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US is a bad thing. One story explains that the terrorist group, ISIS, has successfully infiltrated terrorists into refugee groups, and another criticizes the Obama administration not only for planning to accept a large number of refugees but also for not vetting these refugees’ social media pages more thoroughly. Further, one headline reads “Democrats urge US to take 100,000 Syrian refugees” implying that accepting Syrian refugees is associated with Democrats. Drawing from the information available, it was hypothesized that students would overestimate the percentage of Republicans that oppose allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US. Even though information was limited for this issue, it was hypothesized that students would overestimate the percentage of Democrats that favor allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US.

Affirmative Action

When examining affirmative action in the headlines, one particular event is helpful: the lawsuit against Harvard University. Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard alleges that Harvard discriminated against Asian-American using affirmative action and the case has brought the issue back into the news spotlight. Coverage of this case proves helpful in determining how news outlets have framed affirmative action. The Wall Street Journal covers the case more positively by publishing multiple stories in which a party is defending Harvard’s right to judge students according to its own standards, even if those standards include judging students based on race. Outside of this case, another story seemingly praises California for being the first state to mandate that companies put females on their boards. These stories paint affirmative action in a positive light. Meanwhile, the Washington Times refer to the harm of affirmative action “despite” conservative leaders’ efforts. Another story addresses the Harvard case by saying that
the Department of Justice plans to investigate affirmative action policies in universities, implying that affirmative action is a crime that has been committed. Further, another story calls for “the overdue end” of affirmative action. These biases suggest that conservatives would stand against affirmative action and liberals would support affirmative action. Therefore, it was hypothesized that students would overestimate the percentage of Democrats that favor affirmative action in universities. It was also hypothesized that students would overestimate the percentage of Republicans that oppose affirmative action in universities.

**HYPOTHESES**

**H\text{null}:** Students will accurately guess the percentage of Democrats and Republicans in each category listed for each issue.

**H\text{1}:** Students will overestimate the percentage of Democrats that support making it more difficult to get a gun. Students will overestimate the percentage of Republicans that support making it easier to get a gun.

**H\text{2}:** Students will overestimate the percentage of Democrats that support full marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples. Students will overestimate the percentage of Republicans that support no legal recognition of gay and lesbian relationships.

**H\text{3}:** Students will overestimate the percentage of Democrats that support increasing federal welfare spending. Students will overestimate the percentage of Republicans that support decreasing federal welfare spending.

**H\text{4}:** Students will overestimate the percentage of Democrats that oppose building a wall with Mexico. Students will overestimate the percentage of Republicans that favor building a wall with Mexico.
H5: Students will overestimate the percentage of Democrats that favor allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US. Students will overestimate the percentage of Republicans that oppose allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US.

H6: Students will overestimate the percentage of Democrats that favor affirmative action in universities. Students will overestimate the percentage of Republicans that oppose affirmative action in universities.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The tables generated utilized survey responses from the American National Election Studies. For the 2016 Time Series Study, ANES surveyed a total of 4,271 respondents and questionnaires were distributed both face-to-face and via the internet. The margin of error for this survey is ±1.5. For face-to-face questionnaires, ANES used an address-based sampling method in 48 states and DC (excluding Alaska and Hawaii) and used address-based sampling in 50 states and DC for internet questionnaires. This sampling frame came from a list of residential addresses where the United States Postal Service delivered mail. The participants included were US citizens aged 18 or older within the aforementioned geographic areas. The face-to-face questionnaires included in-person recruitment and interviews. Respondents received paid incentives for responding. The questionnaires were administered in English and Spanish. The response rate for face-to-face questionnaires was 50 percent and 44 percent for the internet questionnaires.

Using the University of California, Berkeley’s Survey Documentation and Analysis tool, tables were generated to show individual’s answers. Respondents’ party affiliation was recorded in the columns, including only the mainstream parties: Democrat, Republican, and Independent. This was repeated for all six tables created. For each table, the answer choices for the question
from the ANES questionnaire are listed in the rows. The tables used the full sample, pre-election weight. The six issues discussed are as follows:

1. Should the federal government make it more difficult to buy a gun?
2. What is your position on gay marriage?
3. Should the federal government increase welfare spending?
4. Should the US build a wall with Mexico?
5. Should Syrian refugees be allowed to come to the US?
6. Do you favor or oppose Affirmative Action in Universities?

The resulting tables each displayed the percentage of self-identified Democrats, Republicans, and Independents that chose each answer choice for each of the aforementioned questions.

Further, to gauge individuals’ perceptions of the polarization of society, political science students at the University of Louisville were asked to guess the percentages in the tables. The actual percentages were blanked out and then copies of the tables were distributed to the students. The question asked was listed on each table and students were then told to guess what percentage of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents chose which answer choice. The sample size consisted of 20 students. The tables given can be found in the Appendix. The student surveys were distributed in an upper level political science class at the University Louisville. Students in this class ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-two. Instructions were given orally and some surveys were thrown out due to answers that were irreconcilable with the question asked.

RESULTS
The tables with ANES survey results and student survey results can be found in the appendix. Results were further rearranged into graphs to make the data more readable which can also be found in the appendix. Graphs 1.1 – 6.1 represent the percent difference between the ANES survey results and the student survey results. The percent differences were calculated by subtracting the ANES survey results from the student results. Therefore, a negative value indicates that students underestimated a value and a positive value indicates that students overestimated a value. Aside from the issue of gun control, students’ overall guesses were more accurate for Republicans than Democrats.

Graph 1 shows the results of the percentages of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents that felt the federal government should make it more difficult, easier, or the rules should be kept the same. The Chi-Squared test p-value for these data is less than 0.01 meaning this relationship is statistically significant. This indicates that the way people answered the question is at least correlated to their political affiliation and they were not choosing a random answer. In examining the frequency distributions among Democrats, a majority of Democrats, (95%), feel that the rules should be kept at least as strict as they are now if not stricter. Among Republicans, the majority said that the rules should be kept the same, but the next most frequently chosen answer was ‘make the rules more difficult’. Independents follow the same trend as Democrats with 93.2% saying the rules should at least be as strict as they are currently if not stricter.

After asking students to guess how they thought people answered the questions, the average for each cell was calculated and a new table was recorded. Students underestimated the percentage of Democrats that thought it should be more difficult to get a gun. Students also
underestimated the percentage of Republicans that thought it should be more difficult to get a gun. Students underestimated the percentage of Republicans that think the current gun laws should be kept the same and significantly overestimated the percentage of Republicans that think it should be easier to get a gun. Students underestimated the percentage of Independents that think it should be more difficult to get a gun but overestimated those Independents that think it should be easier to get a gun. Students underestimated the percentage of Independents that think the current gun laws should be kept the same.

[Graph 1.1 here]

    Graph 1.1 represents how much the students either overestimated or underestimated the results from the ANES survey regarding gun control. The average difference for Democrats was 8.4%, the average difference for Republicans was 32.4%, and the average difference for Independents was 19.1%. H₁ was partially supported as shown in Graph 1.1. While students did in fact overestimate the percentage of Republicans that think it should be easier to get a gun by a large margin of 48.6%, the students actually underestimated the percentage of Democrats that think it should be more difficult to get a gun by 14.2%.

[Graph 2 here]

    Graph 2 shows Democrats’, Republicans’, and Independents’ positions on gay marriage. The Chi-Squared test p-value for these data is less than 0.01 meaning this relationship is statistically significant. This indicates that the way people answered the question is at least correlated to their political affiliation and they were not choosing a random answer. Among Democrats, the option to allow gay couples the right to legally marry was chosen the most often but the remaining minority are split down the middle between only allowing civil unions and not legally recognizing gay marriage at all. For Republicans, while the answer chosen most
frequently was allowing gays to legally marry, the majority are split between allowing civil unions and not allowing any legal recognition. For Independents, the majority said gay couples should be allowed to legal marry, the next most frequent answer choice was to allow civil unions, and least frequent answer choice was to not legally recognize gay marriage at all.

Students overestimated the percentage of Democrats that think gay and lesbian couples should be able to legally marry and underestimated the percentage of Democrats that think there should be no legal recognition of gay and lesbian marriages. Students overestimated the percentage of Republicans that think gay and lesbian couples should be able to legally marry but guessed fairly accurately for the rest of the categories.

[Graph 2.1 here]

Graph 2.1 represents how much the students overestimated or underestimated the results of the ANES survey regarding the issue of gay marriage. The average difference for Democrats was 5.2%, the average difference for Republicans was 5.9%, and the average difference for Independents was 5.0%. Graph 2.1 shows that H₂ was partially supported and this partial support was weak. Students did overestimate the percentage of Democrats that support full gay marriage rights but only by 8.2%. For Republicans students actually underestimated the percentage that support no legal recognition of gay marriage but again by a small margin of 5.4%.

[Graph 3 here]

Graph 3 shows how respondents answered the question “should federal welfare spending be increased, decreased, or kept the same?” The Chi-Squared test p-value for these data is less than 0.01 meaning this relationship is statistically significant. This indicates that the way people answered the question is at least correlated to their political affiliation and they were not choosing a random answer. Upon examining the frequency distributions, it can be determined
that a majority of Democrats (about 75%) feel that federal welfare spending should be at least as much as it is currently (kept the same or increased). A majority of Republicans (about 93%) feel that federal welfare spending should be kept either as much as it is currently or decreased. A majority of Independents (about 79%) feel that federal welfare spending should either be kept at the current level or decreased.

For this question, students significantly overestimated the percentage of Democrats that think federal welfare spending should be increased and underestimated both the percentages of Democrats that think it should be decreased and Democrats that think it should be kept the same. Students also overestimated the percentage of Republicans that think federal welfare spending should be increased and underestimated the percentages of Republicans that think it should be decreased and the percentages of Republicans that think it should be kept the same. Students significantly overestimated the percentage of Independents that think federal welfare spending should be increased and underestimated both those Independents that think federal welfare spending should be decreased and those that think it should be kept the same.

[Graph 3.1 here]

Graph 3.1 shows how much students overestimated or underestimated the results of the ANES survey for the issue of federal welfare spending. The average difference for Democrats was 24.2%, the average difference for Republicans was 6.2%, and the average difference for Independents was 13.9%. Graph 3.1 shows that H₃ was also partially supported. Students overestimated the percentage of Democrats that support increasing federal welfare spending by 36% but underestimated the percentage of Republicans that support decreasing federal welfare spending by 6%.

[Graph 4 here]
Graph 4 shows whether people favor or oppose building a wall with Mexico. The Chi-Squared test p-value for these data is less than 0.01 meaning this relationship is statistically significant. This indicates that the way people answered the question is at least correlated to their political affiliation and they were not choosing a random answer. The frequency distribution indicates that Democrats most often chose to oppose the wall, next they chose neither to oppose nor favor the wall, and least often they chose to favor the wall. Republicans chose most often to favor the wall, then they chose neither to oppose nor to favor the wall, and least often they chose to oppose the wall. Independents however were all but tied for choosing to oppose or favor the wall, and a small minority choosing to neither oppose nor favor the wall.

Students guessed fairly accurately for all categories. However, the students did overestimate the percentage of Democrats that oppose the wall and underestimated the percentage of Democrats that favor the wall.

[Graph 4.1 here]

Graph 4.1 shows how much students overestimated or underestimated the results of the ANES survey regarding building a wall with Mexico. The average difference for Democrats was 8.6%, the average difference for Republicans was 6.0%, and the average difference for Independents was 3.5%. Graph 4.1 shows that H₄ was partially supported. Students overestimated the percentage of Democrats that oppose the wall by 12.9% but underestimated the percentage of Republicans that favor the wall by 3.8%.

[Graph 5 here]

Graph 5 shows how respondents feel about whether Syrian refugees should be allowed to come to the United States. The Chi-Squared test p-value for these data is less than 0.01 meaning this relationship is statistically significant. This indicates that the way people answered the
question is at least correlated to their political affiliation and they were not choosing a random answer. For the frequency distribution, Democrats most often favored allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US, however this was not the majority of Democrats. The majority was split between opposing the idea and neither favoring nor opposing, with the neither option winning overall. A majority of Republicans chose to oppose allowing Syrian refugees, then chose neither, and a few chose to favor the idea. Independents are split down the middle, with 50% choosing to oppose the idea and the remaining 50% choosing neither and then to favor the idea.

Students overestimated the percentage of Democrats that favor allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US and underestimated both those that oppose the idea and those that neither favor nor oppose. Students also overestimated the percentage of Republicans that favor allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US and underestimated those that oppose the idea and those that neither favor nor oppose. The same trend applies to the students’ guesses for Independents. [Graph 5.1 here]

Graph 5.1 shows how much students overestimated or underestimated the results of the ANES survey regarding allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US. The average difference for Democrats was 18.7%, the average difference for Republicans was 8.9%, and the average difference for Independents was 12.1%. Graph 5.1 shows that H$_5$ was also partially supported. Students overestimated the percentage of Democrats that favor allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US by 28% but underestimated the percentage of Republicans that oppose the idea by 8.3%.

[Graph 6 here]

Graph 6 reveals how respondents feel about affirmative action in universities. The Chi-Squared test p-value for these data is less than 0.01 meaning this relationship is statistically
significant. This indicates that the way people answered the question is at least correlated to their political affiliation and they were not choosing a random answer. Regarding the frequency distributions, for Democrats the most commonly chosen answer was ‘neither favor nor oppose’ affirmative action, however this was not the majority. Next was to favor affirmative action and lastly was to oppose. For Republicans, the majority oppose affirmative action in universities, the next most commonly chosen answer was to neither favor nor oppose, then favor was the least chosen. For Independents, the majority are split between opposing affirmative action (which was chosen just slightly more often) and neither favoring nor opposing, while the least chosen answer was to favor affirmative action in universities.

For all three parties – Democrats, Republicans, and Independents – students significantly overestimated the percentage that favor affirmative action in universities and underestimated the percentage that opposed the idea or neither favored nor opposed.

[Graph 6.1 here]

Graph 6.1 shows how much students overestimated or underestimated the results of the ANES survey regarding affirmative action in universities. The average difference for Democrats was 21.4%, the average difference for Republicans was 13.4%, and the average difference for Independents was 16.1%. Graph 6.1 shows that H₆ was partially supported. Students overestimated the percentage of Democrats that favor affirmative action in universities by 32% but underestimated the percentage of Republicans that oppose affirmative action by 4.5%.

DISCUSSION

In conducting this research, the intention was to examine whether individuals’ beliefs were as polarized as the media portrays. As was discussed earlier in this paper, media outlets are often biased and these biases show through in headlines in an attempt to frame the issue. This
research also sought to determine whether people perceive public opinion to be more or less polarized than it is in actuality. The evidence is mixed. On some issues, the students guessed public opinion quite accurately but on others the students’ guesses were off by a significant margin. So, while it cannot be decisively said that perceived public opinion is more polarized than actual public opinion overall, it can be said that perceived public opinion is not the same as actual public opinion. Further, as was mentioned earlier, students guessed significantly more accurately for Republicans and tended to attribute more liberal beliefs to Democrats than they actually hold based on the ANES results. This could be due to the fact that the students were surveyed in a class on a college campus. Not only are younger people more liberal, but so are college campuses. So it is possible that because these college students were in a more liberal environment, they attributed more liberal beliefs to Democrats.

When examining public opinion on gun laws, some interesting trends appear. 18.8% of Democrats feel the current gun laws should be kept the same which is surprisingly large considering gun control has become a major selling point for the Democratic Party (ontheissues.org 2012). Even more interesting, 30% of Republicans said it should be more difficult to get a gun. Fighting stricter gun laws has become a staple of the Republican party in recent years which is what makes it so surprising that 30% of Republicans actually support gun control (ontheissues.org 2012). As far as how individuals perceive public opinion on this issue, the students guessed that almost 60% of Republicans want to make it easier to get a gun when in reality only 9% of Republicans believe that. It is not completely unfounded to think that a large number of Republicans think it should be easier to get a gun considering the current narrative among Republican leaders, but it is surprising that a majority of Republicans surveyed don’t agree with easier gun laws. Further, it surprising that students underestimated the percentage of
Democrats that want it to be harder to get a gun by 14% but overestimated those that want to make it easier by 11%. The gun control issue poses interesting questions regarding the recent wave of mass shootings in America. A surprisingly large chunk of Republicans supports stronger gun control laws yet calls to action by the public and media have gone largely ignored. Republican leaders often claim that they would lose support or not get re-elected if they pushed for gun control because their electorates don’t support it, but it seems as if that’s not really the case. So, then people must ask themselves, why has nothing been done? The purpose of this paper is not to advocate for one policy or another, but it is necessary to point out that many have called for gun control lately and the response always seems to be that Republicans don’t agree but clearly that is not totally the case. Often, when there is large public support for a policy but nothing is getting done, the typical response is to point fingers at large interest groups. It has been suggested that support for gun control tends to spike after focusing events – such as mass shootings – and then subsequently plummet (Krieg & Petulla 2018). Krieg and Petulla also suggest that even if a policy has majority support on its own, it may not be considered as much of a priority as another policy to some and thus, their momentum for enacting change is low. These explanations are not necessarily conclusive but do present possible explanations for the disparities in public opinion that my research has shown.

Gay marriage has been a topic of contention among the parties but has also been more divisive between age ranges. Younger generations on both ends of the political spectrum tend to support gay rights while older generations (mostly conservatives but occasionally liberals) tend to not support gay rights. This research found that Republicans are split fairly evenly among allowing gay marriage, allowing civil unions but not marriage, and not allowing any legal recognition of gay marriages. This is likely indicative of an intra-party faction (Boucek 2012).
Often there are groups within political parties that hold differing beliefs but overall their beliefs align more with one political party than the other. What is also likely is that this division occurs among age groups. Further research could potentially examine Republicans’ opinions on gay marriage, separating for age groups, to determine if this is what’s causing this division. While Democrats on the whole support gay marriage, around 14% said gays should only be allowed to form civil unions and another ~14% said that there should be no legal recognition of gay marriage at all. This could be indicative of factions within the Democratic Party that object to gay marriage based on religious reasons or older Democrats whose beliefs mirror those of an earlier generation. Pew Research Center found that in 2001, almost 60% of American adults – including both Democrats and Republicans – opposed same-sex marriage. In 2017, only 32% of American adults opposed same-sex marriage and 62% supported it. Further, from 2001 to 2017, when breaking down support for same-sex marriage by generation, those born from 1928-1945 (the silent generation) supported same-sex marriage the least. Baby boomers (1946-1964) were next supporting same-sex marriage less than generation x and Millennials but more than the silent generation. Generation X (1965-1980) follow baby boomers, supporting same-sex marriage more than both the silent generation and baby boomers but less than Millennials. Finally, Millennials support gay marriage more than all three previous generations. These trends hold true for every year from 2001-2017. This generational divide is something that could potentially be explored in depth in another study.

Examining welfare spending can be a bit tricky because unlike the previous two issues discussed, ‘welfare’ is broad term that tends to have a negative connotation (DiCarlo 2017). A majority of Democrats said federal welfare spending should be kept the same, followed by about 29% saying it should be increased, and about 25% saying it should be decreased. These numbers
aren’t particularly surprising. However, the students significantly overestimated the percentage of Democrats that thought federal welfare spending should be increased. This issue most clearly demonstrates how people often default to party identification to determine individuals’ stances on issues because the Democratic Party is typically associated with welfare programs.

Republicans responded conservatively with 70% saying welfare spending should be decreased. The students also guessed fairly accurately for Republicans on this issue. Independents’ answers are interesting here because 45% said welfare spending should be decreased, 36.9% saying it should be kept the same, and the remaining minority saying it should be increased. Similar to the guesses for Democrats, the students overestimated the percentage of Independents that thought federal welfare spending should be increased. Not one major political party in the United States supports increasing federal welfare spending with a majority. That being said, the 2010 General Social Survey included a question that asked about individual’s attitudes towards “government spending on programs for low-income families”. One group received a question that called this spending “assistance to the poor” and 68% said that spending was “too little”, 22% said it was “about right”, and only 10% said it was “too much”. A second group received a question calling this spending “welfare” and 42% said spending was “too much”, 34.5% said it was “about right” and 24% said it was “too little”. This goes to show that if the survey were to reword the question, the values would likely be different. In the context of this research, it is possible that welfare programs tend to be associated with the Democratic party which is why students overestimated Democratic support for increasing welfare spending, but because “welfare” has a negative connotation, many Democrats in actuality were hesitant to say it should be increased.

The next issue, building a wall with Mexico, has been very visible but only lately. Up until the 2016 election no one seriously discussed building a wall to solve the immigration issue.
Many policies were discussed on both sides of the aisle but never a wall. Public opinion is tricky to gauge when the issue seems completely preposterous. Keep in mind these data were recorded in 2016 so while the wall idea had been discussed, it likely didn’t seem realistic to most at the time. 67.1% of Democrats oppose building a wall but a surprising 13.5% actually favor the idea. Further, only 59.8% of Republicans favor the idea and 19% oppose it. 21% of Republicans neither favor nor oppose building a wall with Mexico. This could be because, while many Republicans support stronger immigration regulation, they also support decreasing government spending and building a wall is expensive (even though it was claimed that Mexico would pay for it). Finally, Independents’ answers were interesting. Only 43.7% oppose the idea and while it is still a majority, 29.4% actually favor the idea. It can be argued that building a wall is a fairly extreme, right-wing idea, so the fact that almost 30% of those who choose not to affiliate with either Republicans or Democrats favor an extreme right wing idea is telling. The students unsurprisingly underestimated the percentage of Democrats that favor building a wall and overestimated those that oppose it. They guessed more accurately for Republicans but still overestimated opponents of the wall. Their guesses for Independents were actually fairly accurate as well.

The question of allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US also poses some issues. While the issue has been very salient lately, it is a relatively new issue and many people, on both sides, feel that they need more information to accurately determine their opinion. While Democrats tend to support relaxed immigration laws, the case of Syrian refugees poses a separate issue than just allowing immigrants to live here. That being said, only 32.6% of Democrats favor allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US, 26.2% oppose the idea altogether, and a majority of 41.3% neither favor nor oppose the idea. It can be argued that this is likely
because many don’t feel like they know enough about the issue to decide. Many Democrats may be inclined to want to allow refugees to come here but may also feel they need to know more. Republicans, however, fall about where you’d expect. 72.9% oppose allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US, only 7.8% favor the idea, and about 19% neither favor nor oppose it. It is also possible that the reason so many Republicans fall in the neither category is because the crisis in Syria poses a different problem than traditional immigration. While it is true that both refugees and immigrants could be fleeing some sort of persecution, those in Syria are facing a devastating war and immigrants are typically not. This creates an internal conflict/cognitive problem for Republicans because they typically don’t support large amounts of immigration, but also recognize that those in Syria are facing a much larger problem. However, many have also claimed that Syrian refugees coming to the US is just a front for terrorists which may incite fear in both Democrats and Republicans. For Independents, 50% oppose allowing Syrian refugees to come to the US while 20% favor the idea and almost 30% neither favor nor oppose. This indicates that, on this particular issue, Independents fall somewhere between Democrats and Republicans. When asked, the students surveyed significantly overestimated the number of Democrats that favor the idea and also overestimated the Republicans that favor the idea (though by a smaller margin). For Independents they overestimated those that favor and underestimated opponents.

The final issue, affirmative action in universities, had seemed to fall off the political radar for a while there but then a recent lawsuit against several universities brought the issue back into the spotlight. The lawsuits address the question of whether or not affirmative action is an appropriate way to assist minorities when they apply to universities. Further, the option to allow or ban affirmative action has usually been delegated to the states so it tends to be less relevant in
the broader political discourse, but with the lawsuit being in the national media, many have started to pay attention again. The lawsuit was filed in 2014 but gained national attention in 2018. So some individuals surveyed in the ANES survey may have been aware of the lawsuit, others likely were not. Looking at the numbers, while 32.6% of Democrats favor the idea, a majority 41.3% neither favor nor oppose the idea, and a surprisingly large 26% oppose the idea. For Republicans, it is not surprising that only 7.9% favor the idea and 63.6% oppose the idea but it’s surprising that almost 29% neither favor nor oppose the idea. Finally, only 14% of Independents favor the idea, a majority, 43.5%, oppose the idea, and 42.4% neither favor nor oppose affirmative action in universities. The students’ guesses on this issue in particular show how people tend to attribute certain beliefs to each party and then apply those beliefs to Democrats or Republicans as a whole. For example, the students severely overestimated the percentage of Democrats that favor affirmative action. But, they also overestimated the percentage of Independents that favor the idea and the percentage of Republicans that favor the idea. The reason for this could be that young college students tend to be more liberal and thus may think that other people are as well, or it could just be that they don’t know enough about the topic. This issue in particular also raises some concerns regarding the timing of the ANES survey and the timing the student surveys administered. The ANES survey was given in 2016, so the lawsuit bringing affirmative action into the spotlight had already been filed but had not received national attention yet. The student surveys were conducted in 2018, after the lawsuit – and affirmative action – had been brought to attention. So it is possible that those responding to the ANES survey did not have strong opinions on the issue but then the students, having heard about the issue more recently, attributed stronger opinions to the ANES respondents.
When discussing polarization, it should be noted that the political parties themselves have actually become more polarized, for many reasons, which is why America feels more polarized (Fiorina 2017). David Blankenhorn suggests that one major reason for the polarization of the political parties is the lack of a common enemy since the Cold War. Up until the end of the Cold War, America was facing some sort of common enemy that brought people together. Blankenhorn suggests that terrorism could be an exception to this, but it’s been shown that terrorism is quite an abstract enemy that is hard to collectively fight. After the lack of success in the ‘war on terror’ instituted by George W. Bush and the bitter resentment among many, I don’t think terrorism could count as a common enemy. He goes on to say that growing racial, ethnic, and religious diversity also contribute to growing polarization. Most importantly, he (and many others) explains that ‘political party sorting’ is a major contributor. There used to be such a thing as a liberal Republican or a conservative Democrat, but this has become a rare occurrence. When leaders appear to not hold these values, it seems to say that individuals can’t have those values. Clearly, though, this research shows that there are Republicans who hold liberal beliefs on certain topics and there are Democrats who hold conservative beliefs on issues. Even further, Francoise Boucek explains that quite often intra-party factions form within political parties, but in order for parties to get elected they must have a homogeneous platform. So, people will often align themselves with a party platform even if they don’t match all of their own beliefs.

The major thing to take away from this discussion is that perceived public opinion is different than actual public opinion implying that students have an inaccurate perception of public opinion. People may misrepresent their own opinions due to certain social pressures, or people may simply assume that a majority holds a certain opinion (for whatever reason) that they do not actually hold. This information provides many opportunities going forward. To begin,
considering where people stand on an issue and why could provide opportunities to educate people on issues. In the cases of Syrian refugees and affirmative action for example, many people fell into the neither category and while it is entirely possible that some people may truly not care either way, it is also possible that many people feel they need to know more on the topic before making a decision. This provides the opportunity for news stations, organizations, or even individuals to educate the population on those topics in order to gauge public opinion more accurately. Further, this information should lead us to question why certain policies are or aren’t in place. As mentioned above, in the case of gun control, it is clear that many support the strengthening of gun laws, yet nothing is happening. In the case of affirmative action, no majority supports it, but it still occurs across the country. This information should also lead us to approach political discourse with a more positive attitude. When people recognize that their perception of public opinion is different than actual public opinion, they should be able to approach political discourse more amicably. An awareness of public opinion also could help drive compromise in creating policy. When people recognize that actual public opinion is not as polarized as we might expect, they should be able to work together towards problem solving.

What role does media play in all this? Media is likely causing this misperception of public opinion. Media often drives the agenda and what issues get discussed and which ones don’t. While it can be said that newer media such as social networking sites have allowed more players (such as individuals and politicians) to contribute to driving the agenda, the current age of media includes actors who are hard-pressed to always have new, fresh, sellable stories (Chadwick 2013). This often means that stories are not as fleshed out as they could be, or rather, media actors aren’t necessarily educating people on the facts but are creating stories that sell. This leads to misperceptions of public opinion which often rest on a lack of education of policy
issues. If a news station’s viewership is mostly liberal, that station is not going to run a story that examines the conservative point of view. Further, that viewership is not going to change the channel to the conservative news station to get both sides because individuals tend to form their own echo chambers (Sunstein 2017) and don’t look into the opposing view point. On top of this, individuals such as bloggers are putting their opinions on the internet and quite often they are able to post these opinions to trusted news sources’ websites. While this isn’t necessarily a bad thing, because in a Democracy everyone should be involved, it does cause the journalistic standards to degrade because this blogger may not be any more educated in politics than the next person. But because they have followers, their opinions are receiving praise and credibility as if they are an authority on the issue. Individuals need to be aware of this and the consequences of the degradation of journalistic standards and take time to educate themselves.

SHORTCOMINGS

While this research provides valuable insight, there are some things that could have been done better in hindsight. The first thing to address is the timing of both surveys. The ANES survey was conducted in 2016 while the student surveys were conducted in 2018. In those two years, many factors influencing both surveys could have changed, but most importantly, actual public opinion could have shifted. It is possible that the students’ guesses would have been more (or less) accurate had the ANES survey been conducted in 2018. When asking political science students to guess public opinion, the instructions were not as clear as they could have been. Instructions were given orally and not written down. Written instructions likely would have been clearer, and some students were not totally sure what was being asked of them. Further, the political science students at the University of Louisville are likely not representative of the population so this study is not generalizable. However, given more resources this study could
easily be repeated and applied to a larger, more representative sample. It could be argued that political science students would have a more accurate idea of public opinion on certain subject due to the nature of their studies. It was also hard for the students to separate their own opinions from the task at hand. Many students wrote comments on the surveys distributed detailing their own beliefs. Some surveys had to be thrown out completely because people answered how they thought things *should* be, not how they are. Some students wrote down answers that were irreconcilable with the question asked and it was impossible to include those. Given more resources, the sample size could have been increased so that when some answers had to be thrown out, it would not impact the sample size drastically. Further research could examine the guesses of certain populations based on age groups, socioeconomic classes, or education level. This study could also be repeated with the addition of a question asking what news source an individual accesses and how often to measure if media does influence individuals’ perceptions of public opinion.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the goal was to determine whether public opinion is as polarized as it may seem at times. This was measured by examining survey data from the American National Election Studies. Another goal was to determine whether students perceive public opinion to be more polarized than it actually is. The results indicate that perceived public opinion is different than actual public opinion. This research shows that in some cases, when asked to guess public opinion, students may guess very inaccurately but in others they may guess very accurately. While there were several shortcomings in this research, it does provide a foundation for extended surveys similar to this one and also provides opportunities for further research using what has been shown here. This research has shown that compromise is not so ridiculous of a notion.
Hopefully, going forward, people can keep this information in mind and realize that people are not as different from one another as it so often seems. Just because one person is a Democrat and one a Republican, it does not mean that there is not common ground to be found.
APPENDIX

Graph 1

[Graph showing Gun Control results with ANES and Survey Results compared for Democrat, Republican, and Independent percentages.]

Graph 1.1

[Graph showing Gun Control Survey Results Compared to ANES Results with Democrat, Republican, and Independent percentage differences.]
Gay couples should be able to legally marry
Gay couples should be able to form civil unions but not legally marry
There should be no legal recognition of gay marriages

Democrat %
Republican %
Independent %

Gay Marriage
Survey Results Compared to ANES Results

Gay couples should be able to legally marry
Gay couples should be able to form civil unions but not legally marry
There should be no legal recognition of gay marriages
Democrat % Difference
Republican % Difference
Independent % Difference

ANES Results
Survey Results

Graph 2

Graph 2.1
Graph 3

Federal Welfare Spending

![Bar graph comparing ANES Results and Survey Results for Democrat, Republican, and Independent percentages.]

Graph 3.1

Federal Welfare Spending

Survey Results Compared to ANES Results

![Another bar graph showing the differences in percentages for Democrat, Republican, and Independent.]

ANES Results | Survey Results
---|---

Democrat % | Republican % | Independent %

Increased | Decreased | Kept the same | Increased | Decreased | Kept the same | Increased | Decreased | Kept the same

...
Graph 4

Building a Wall with Mexico

ANES Results
Survey Results

Democrat %
Republican %
Independent %

Favor
Oppose
Neither
Favor
Oppose
Neither
Favor
Oppose
Neither

13.5 9.9 67.1 80.0
19.4 10.1
59.8 56.1
19.1 28.8 21.1
16.6
29.4 28.6 43.7 47.8 26.9 21.2

Graph 4.1

Building a Wall with Mexico
Survey Results Compared to ANES Results

Democrat % Difference
Republican % Difference
Independent % Difference

Favor
Oppose
Neither
Favor
Oppose
Neither
Favor
Oppose
Neither

-3.6 -9.3 -3.8 -9.7 -4.5 -0.8 -5.7
Graph 5

Syrian Refugees

Graph 5.1

Syrian Refugees
Survey Results Compared to ANES Results

Democrat % Difference    Republican % Difference    Independent % Difference

Favor   Oppose   Neither   Favor   Oppose   Neither   Favor   Oppose   Neither

ANES Results    Survey Results
Graph 6

Graph 6.1

Affirmative Action

Survey Results Compared to ANES Results

Democrat % Difference
Republican % Difference
Independent % Difference
Table 1: Comparison of Actual and Perceived Attitudes about Gun Control across Party Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ANES Results</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat %</td>
<td>Republican %</td>
<td>Independent %</td>
<td>Row Total N</td>
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<tr>
<td>More difficult</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>2,171.5</td>
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<td>Easier</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>276.4</td>
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<td>Keep the same</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>1,598.3</td>
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<td>Column Total N</td>
<td>1,487.3</td>
<td>1,194.8</td>
<td>1,364.2</td>
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Chisq = 571.26, p < 0.01

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Student Survey Results</th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More difficult</td>
<td>62.0</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Easier</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>32.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keep the same</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>35.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Column Total N</td>
<td></td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chisq =

Note: Data come from the 2016 American National Election Studies and a survey of students at the University of Louisville. ANES estimates are based on the provided weights.
Table 2: Comparison of Actual and Perceived Attitudes Toward Gay Marriage Across Party Identification

<table>
<thead>
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<th>ANES Results</th>
<th>Student Survey Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat %</td>
<td>Republican %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay couples should be able to legally marry</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>38.8</td>
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<td>Gay couples should be able to form civil unions but not legally marry</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>32.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>There should be no legal recognition of gay marriages</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>28.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Column Total N</td>
<td>1,470.1</td>
<td>1,185.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chisq = 571.26, p < 0.01

Note: Data come from the 2016 American National Election Studies and a survey of students at the University of Louisville. ANES estimates are based on the provided weights.
Table 3: Comparison of Actual and Perceived Attitudes Towards Federal Welfare Spending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ANES Results</th>
<th>Student Survey Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat %</td>
<td>Republican %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>7.1</td>
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<td>Decreased</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>70.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kept the Same</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>22.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Column Total N</td>
<td>1,479.7</td>
<td>1,193.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chisq = 571.26, p &lt; 0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data come from the 2016 American National Election Studies and a survey of students at the University of Louisville. ANES estimates are based on the provided weights.
Table 4: Comparison of Actual and Perceived Attitudes Towards Building a Wall with Mexico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ANES Results</th>
<th>Student Survey Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat %</td>
<td>Republican %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favor</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppose</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column Total N</td>
<td>1,485.9</td>
<td>1,195.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chisq = 571.26, p &lt; 0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data come from the 2016 American National Election Studies and a survey of students at the University of Louisville. ANES estimates are based on the provided weights.
Table 5: Comparison of Actual and Perceived Attitudes Towards Allowing Syrian Refugees to Come to the US

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democrat %</th>
<th>Republican %</th>
<th>Independent %</th>
<th>Row Total N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favor</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>915.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppose</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>1,977.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>1,139.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column Total</td>
<td>1,476.1</td>
<td>1,193.5</td>
<td>1,363.3</td>
<td>4,032.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chisq = 571.26, p < 0.01

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ANES Results</th>
<th>Student Survey Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat %</td>
<td>Republican %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favor</td>
<td>65.14</td>
<td>19.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppose</td>
<td>20.05</td>
<td>64.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>14.81</td>
<td>13.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data come from the 2016 American National Election Studies and a survey of students at the University of Louisville. ANES estimates are based on the provided weights.
Table 6: Comparison of Actual and Perceived Attitudes Towards Affirmative Action in Universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ANES Results</th>
<th>Student Survey Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat %</td>
<td>Republican %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favor</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppose</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column Total N</td>
<td>1,481.6</td>
<td>1,179.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chisq = 571.26, p < 0.01

Note: Data come from the 2016 American National Election Studies and a survey of students at the University of Louisville. ANES estimates are based on the provided weights.
**Tables Given to Students to Guess Public Opinion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>v161187</th>
<th>1: 1. More difficult</th>
<th>2: 2. Easier</th>
<th>3: 3. Keep these rules about the same</th>
<th><strong>COL TOTAL</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Democrat</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Republican</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Independent</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>279.6</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COL TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,132.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>368.9</strong></td>
<td><strong>670.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,487.3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Color coding:**
- <2.0: Smaller than expected
- <1.0: Larger than expected
- >0.0: Smaller than expected
- >1.0: Larger than expected
- >2.0: Smaller than expected
- **Z**: Larger than expected

This table is from survey data collected by the ANES. The question asked was “should the federal government make it more difficult to purchase a gun?” The boxes each represent what percentage of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents answered which way. I am asking you to guess what percentage of each party you think answered which answer. So, for example, if you think that 40% of Republicans think it should be easier to get a gun then you would write 40 in the “easier” row under the “Republican” column.
### Frequency Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>v161231</th>
<th>v161155</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 1. Democrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: 1. Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 2. Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to form civil unions but not legally marry.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 3. There should be no legal recognition of a gay or lesbian couple's relationship.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COL TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is your position on gay marriage?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency Distribution</th>
<th>v161155</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cells contain:</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Column percent</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Weighted N</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>v161209</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: 1. Increased</td>
<td>2. Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 2. Decreased</td>
<td>3. Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 3. Kept the same</td>
<td><strong>ROW TOTAL</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Should the federal government increase, decrease, or keep the same federal welfare spending?**
### Frequency Distribution

Cells contain:
- Column percent
- Weighted N

| v161196 | v161155 |  |  |  |
|---------|---------|  |  |  |
|         | 1. Democrat | 2. Republican | 3. Independent | TOTAL |
| 1: 1. Favor | 13.5 | 59.8 | 715.3 | 29.4 | 402.0 |
| 2: 2. Oppose | 67.1 | 19.1 | 228.5 | 43.7 | 598.1 |
| 3: 3. Neither favor nor oppose | 19.4 | 21.1 | 251.8 | 26.9 | 367.5 |

**COL TOTAL**

**ROW TOTAL**

Should the US build a wall with Mexico?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>v161214</th>
<th>v161155</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>ROW TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>v161214</td>
<td>1: 1. Favor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>COL TOTAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 2. Oppose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 3. Neither favor nor oppose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Should Syrian Refugees be allowed to come to the US?*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>v161204</th>
<th>v16155</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: 1. Favor</td>
<td>1. Democrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: 2. Oppose</td>
<td>2. Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: 3. Neither favor nor oppose</td>
<td>3. Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COL TOTAL</td>
<td>ROW TOTAL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you favor or oppose affirmative action in Universities?
BIBLIOGRAPHY


https://democrats.org/about/party-platform/


Sunstein, C. (2001). #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media


