

Someone like you: False consensus in perceptions of Democrats and Republicans

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Abstract

In this paper, I demonstrate false consensus in Americans' perceptions of ordinary party members: the more a person agrees with a statement, the more they believe that in-party members would also agree. I find traces of false consensus for the out-party as well. This pattern in perceptions of ordinary partisans is very similar to the pattern I find in perceptions of politicians' positions. This suggests that false consensus is closely related to another phenomenon in political perceptions: assimilation. I also show that Americans' perceptions of their in-parties are more correlated with their own opinions than in reality. The results have implications for our understanding of affective polarization, of real-world cueing effects, and of representation.

1 Introduction

People tend to overestimate the prevalence of their own attitudes and behaviors—from their opinions about teaching morality in schools, to their (un)willingness to wear a sandwich board around campus (Wojcieszak and Price, 2009; Ross et al., 1977). In social psychology this is known as the “false-consensus effect”. Recently, a few studies have investigated false consensus in political opinions. Leviston et al.

(2013) and Mildenerger and Tingley (2017) find that Australians and Americans overestimate the number of fellow citizens who share their own opinion about climate change. Related, Delavande and Manski (2012) find that Americans are overly confident about the electoral chances of their favorite candidate.

Almost all of these studies on political opinions, however, have investigated false consensus in the general population. Meanwhile, most psychological research on false consensus has focused on perceptions of social in-groups (Robbins and Krueger, 2005). Respondents also project their own opinions on out-group members, but much less so. In this study, I show that false consensus extends to people's perceptions of the political attitudes of Democrats and Republicans. In other words, Americans perceive the opinions of ordinary in-party (and to a lesser extent out-party) members differently, depending on their own opinions.

Moreover, false consensus is about the same for ordinary party members and politicians. This connects false consensus to assimilation, a phenomenon where citizens tend to see the opinions of their preferred political candidate as being close to their own (Granberg and Brent, 1974). My findings demonstrate that false consensus and assimilation are, at least in this case, very similar processes with similar results.

I also find that Americans' perceptions of political attitudes vary enormously, and that they have little in common with real survey data. When respondents estimate the percentage of Democrats or Republicans who agree with an opinion statement, they are typically off by almost 30 percentage points. In fact, perceptions of our in-parties are more correlated with our own opinions than with reality. This is problematic for representation. If perceptions of elite opinions are largely a mix of false consensus and randomness, then elites will be punished or rewarded

in elections for the positions they take.

These correlational findings have a number of causal interpretations. False consensus could be compatible with partisan cueing or persuasion. That is, people might change their opinions depending on where they think their in-party stands (e.g. Cohen 2003; Druckman et al. 2013). In rare cases, they may even switch parties due to perceived disagreement about an issue (Carsey and Layman, 2006). However, this does not explain how people end up with such different perceptions of stances.

False consensus could also arise when people adjust their perceptions to their own opinions (egocentric bias or projection). This, on the other hand, is less compatible with the fact that I also find small false consensus effects for the out-party. Finally, opinions could be correlated with the signals people receive about the opinions of their in- and out-groups. Perhaps people re-interpret party cues to fit their own opinion, or perhaps they receive cues that are tailored to their existing opinion. These results add to a literature that raises questions about how partisan cues function in the real world (Adams et al., 2011; Somer-Topcu et al., 2020).

2 Methods

In a May 2019 survey, I polled a nationally diverse sample of 2052 US residents (Lucid, drawn from an online panel to reflect population demographics). Appendix section 1 compares sample demographics to the US population. I asked respondents two questions about a series of policy statements: a perception question, and a personal agreement question.

The first question probed respondents' perceptions of opinions within one of the parties. Respondents read the following prompt:

Out of every 100 [Democrat/Republican] [citizens/politicians], how many do you think agree with the following statements?

Each respondent was randomly assigned to their own in-party or out-party, and to citizens or politicians. In other words, this question incorporated a two-by-two between-subjects design, crossing in/out-party with target group.

In a second question, all respondents indicated their personal agreement with the policy statements on a seven-point scale. The perception and personal opinion measures were separated by several blocks of unrelated questions.

Each respondent answered these questions about four policy statements, randomly selected from eight statements about taxing the wealthy, affirmative action, EPA greenhouse gas regulations, gay marriage, illegal immigrants, medical marijuana, Medicare, and UN peacekeeping (see Appendix section 2).

Partisans are pooled with partisan "leaners" (respondents who felt closer to one party if they had to choose). Respondents are labeled as independents if they gave no party affiliation even after being asked to choose one. With four policy statements per respondent, results are based on 8044 observations, with 6776 coming from non-independents.

3 Results

3.1 False consensus among parties

Figure 1 visualizes the connection between perceptions of parties and personal opinions for respondents who were asked about their in-parties (top panel) or their out-parties (bottom panel). For in-parties, the connection is remarkably tight. The more strongly a respondent agrees with each statement, the more likely they are to believe that many citizens (and politicians) in their in-party also agree with it. On the other hand, perceptions of the out-party are less clearly correlated with personal opinions.

To confirm, I regress perceived agreement on personal opinions, pooling questions about all policies and parties. The model includes a three-way interaction between personal opinion, party relationship (in-party v. out-party), and target group (citizens v. politicians), plus all corresponding lower-order effects. This way, we can estimate the coefficient of personal opinion for each party–group combination (e.g. in-party citizens). I also use interaction effects to control for the combination of policy statement, party and target group that the respondent is being asked about (e.g., Democrat citizens on tax policy). Finally, the model includes respondent-level fixed effects and clustered standard errors. Appendix sections 3 and 4 detail models and show regression tables.

Figure 2 shows the coefficients of personal opinion in this model of perceived agreement. We can see that false consensus is strongest for in-party citizens: a one-point increase in personal agreement with a statement (seven-point scale) corresponds to an almost seven-percentage-point increase in perceived agreement of ordinary in-party members with that statement. False consensus for politicians is

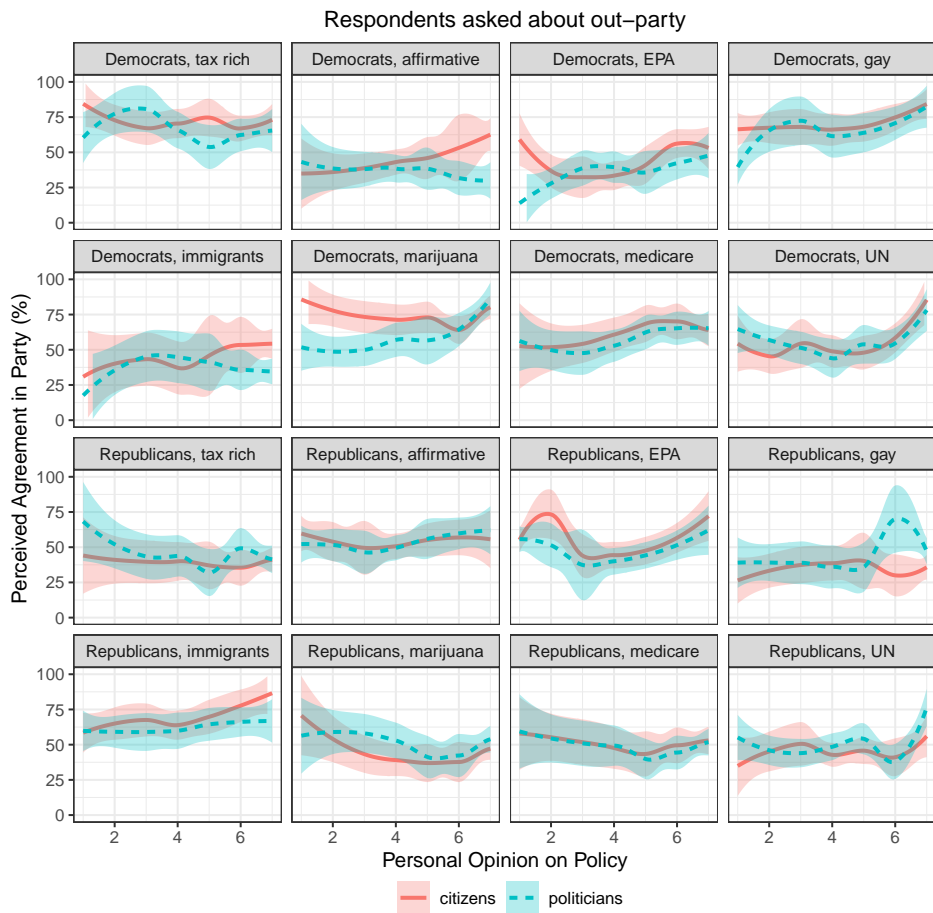
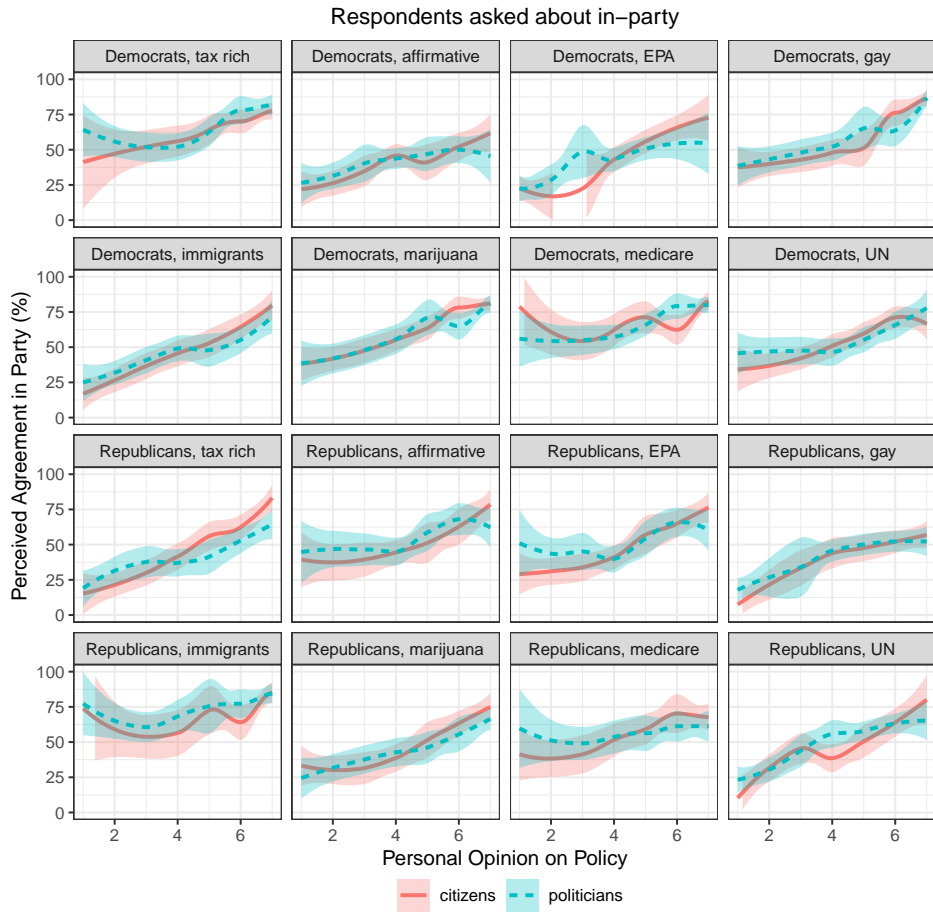


Figure 1: Loess-smoothed average perceptions of a party's agreement with each policy statement (y-axis), depending on personal agreement of respondents with the statement (x-axis, 7-point scale), with 95% confidence bands.

nearly the same strength (though the small difference between the two coefficients is marginally significant).

For the out-party, we see small but statistically significant false consensus. A one-point increase in personal agreement is connected to a one-percentage-point increase in how many out-party members (or out-party politicians) are perceived to agree. Coefficients are almost identical for politicians and for citizens. Appendix section 5 shows that this is not due to a typical pattern in group perceptions called out-group homogeneity bias.

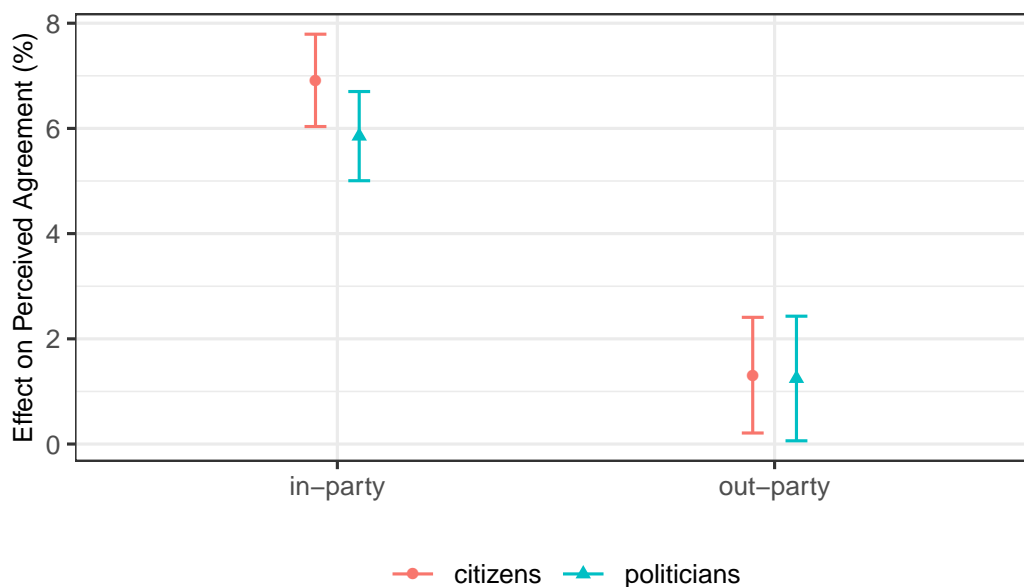


Figure 2: Coefficient of personal opinion (7-point scale) in model of perceived agreement (in percentage points) among either citizens or politicians, in either one's in-party or one's out-party. Bars are 95% confidence intervals.

3.2 Robustness checks

There are two notable methodological concerns with the survey above. First, because people indicated their perceptions of the parties only minutes before, their

answers to the perception questions may have anchored their opinion responses. This could have created a spurious correlation between the two. Second, people who identify as Democrats and Republicans may still vary significantly in how they *feel* about Democrats and Republicans. As a result, they could also vary in their receptiveness to party cues, and in their need to square their opinions with those of the in-party, and to distance themselves from the out-party.

I address both concerns with data from a two-phase survey, run on Amazon Mechanical Turk in July–September 2018. First, respondents indicated their perceptions of agreement with all eight policy statements among a partisan target group (e.g. Republican citizens). This phase also included a feeling thermometer (0-100) about the same group. Two weeks later, respondents answered the eight personal opinion questions (retention: 71%). In total, I collected 7553 respondent–policy combinations.¹ True independents and half of Democrat respondents (selected at random) were filtered out before the start of the survey. Democrats are overrepresented on Mechanical Turk, but after the filter, there was near-perfect balance between Democrats and Republicans.

I analyze these data in the same way as the nationally diverse survey, with one distinction. I replace the party relationship variable (in-party v. out-party) with a 100-point feeling thermometer, indicating how warmly the respondent feels towards the partisan group whose opinions they are estimating. We see significant positive interactions of similar sizes for citizens (0.08, 95% CI: [0.06,0.11]) and politicians (0.08, 95% CI: [0.06,0.10]) as the target groups. The more positive a respondent feels about a partisan group, the stronger the connection between their

¹This survey was part of an experiment about cueing effects. After confirming that there were no spillover effects of the cue treatment on other policies, I simply dropped the treated policy for each respondent.

perceptions of that partisan group and their own opinions.

To understand these interactions, suppose a respondent rates their feelings towards some party members as 73 out of 100 (people’s average warmth towards in-party members). Then for each extra point of personal agreement with a policy statement on the 7-point scale, they will tend to believe that those partisans agree with the statement by an extra 5 percentage points. Now suppose a respondent rates their feelings as 37 (average warmth towards out-party members). For each extra point of personal agreement with an item, they will perceive party agreement as just 2 percentage points higher. Once again, we see strong false consensus for liked partisan groups, and weak false consensus for disliked groups.

I also test a model using party identification (as before) rather than feeling thermometers. It shows significant in-party assimilation: coefficients for both citizens and politicians are almost identical to those from the national survey. For the out-party, the opinion–perception connections become non-significant.

3.3 False consensus versus reality

To get a perspective on the importance of these opinion–perception connections, we can compare false consensus to the link between perceptions and reality. The policy statements in my surveys had earlier been presented by Broockman (2016) to a convenience sample of 200 state legislators and a representative sample of 1000 Americans. Within each party and target group (politicians and citizens), that survey measured the actual percentage of respondents who agreed with these statements.

Figure 3 illustrates the accuracy of respondents’ perceptions (in the Lucid sam-

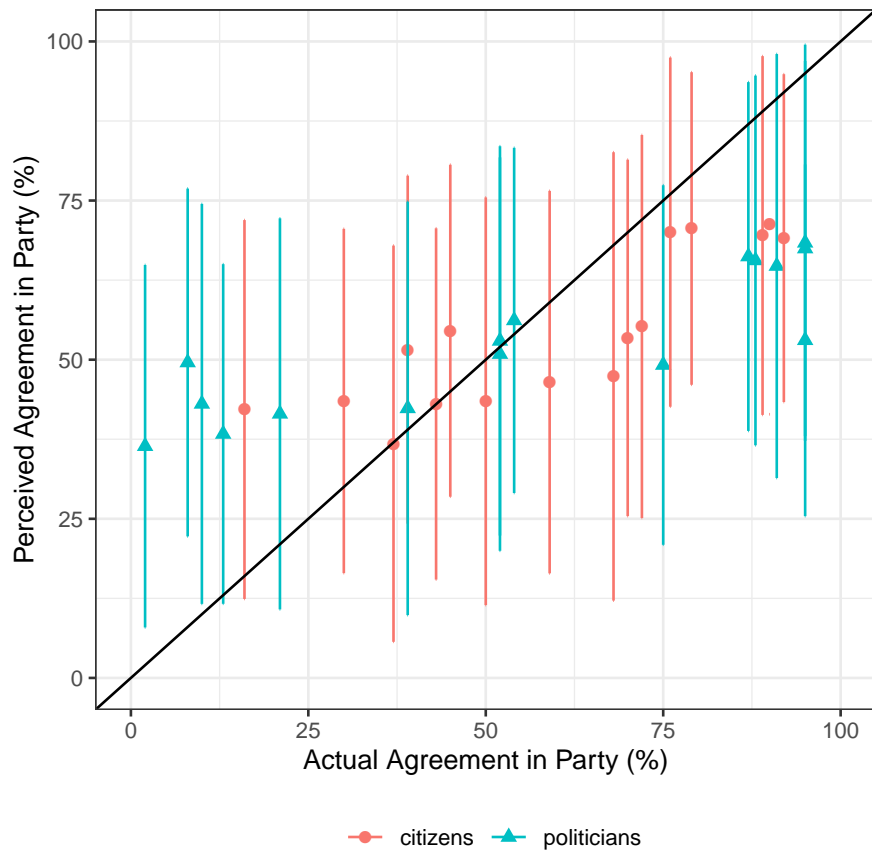


Figure 3: Each point shows average perceived agreement with a policy in a party (Democrat/Republican) and target group (citizens/politicians), versus actual agreement. Bars show one standard deviation on each side.

ple), for each combination of policy, party and target group (citizens v. politicians). If opinion perceptions were accurate on average, all points in this plot would be on the identity line. Instead, average estimates have a very weak connection to real opinions. The plotted intervals show why: respondents' guesses vary tremendously, and this draws averages towards the middle. In fact, perceptions are "off" by 28 percentage points on average.

One concern may be that the current surveys were fielded in 2018 and 2019, whereas true agreement percentages come from a survey done in 2013. Appendix section 6 illustrates why this is not a likely cause of respondents' inaccuracy. Further, even if the *average* guess for each issue, party and target group were exactly correct, there is still immense variation in the *individual* guesses. Perceived agreement percentages (for the same policy statement and party target group) have a standard deviation of 29. Coincidentally, this is the same variability we would have seen if respondents had guessed a random number between 0 and 100.

At the individual level, we can look at how strongly respondents' perceptions correlate with real variation in partisan opinions, and with their own opinions. The correlation between in-party perceptions and real party agreement is .37. Meanwhile, within combinations of statement, party and target group, the average correlation between in-party perceptions and opinions is .45. Out-party perceptions are less connected to reality ($r = .25$), and are also less correlated with opinions ($r = .09$). Appendix section 7 details the methodology behind these correlations, and shows that the perceptions of high-knowledge respondents are only somewhat more connected to reality.

4 Discussion

In this paper, I test false consensus in perceptions of the opinions of ordinary party members, and I compare it to the same pattern in perceptions of politicians. I show that Americans overestimate how common their own opinions are within their party at large, and that the pattern is similar to that for in-party politicians. Surprisingly, a weak version of false consensus applies to out-party members and politicians as well—reflecting earlier findings on out-groups (Robbins and Krueger, 2005).

The results reveal a close relationship between false consensus (a social psychology concept explaining perceptions of ordinary people) and assimilation (a political behavior concept explaining perceptions of politicians). They encourage us to look for explanations that can cover both cases. One such explanation is variation in the opinion statements people are exposed to. Mass party members might look different to different observers, simply because people are surrounded by fellow party members who are more similar to them than the average in-party member. And parties can tailor their opinion statements to particular audiences, to match the opinions that those audiences already have (Krosnick, 1990).

The fact that I find some false consensus even for out-parties (and disliked partisan groups) supports this explanation. That is, out-party members in a person’s network may also be more similar to them than the out-party as a whole. And elites, too, could fine-tune their messages to different out-party audiences. Given how coldly Americans feel about their out-party (and especially its elites, see also Druckman and Levendusky 2019), it is hard to imagine that respondents *prefer* to believe that their opinions are common in that group. A psychological need for

being similar to the target group is not a strong explanation for false consensus in the case of out-groups (Robbins and Krueger, 2005).

Another alternative would be that respondents simply use their opinion as a heuristic for everyone else’s—including out-partisans (Feldman and Conover, 1983). The causal mechanisms underlying false consensus also determine their generalizability to other, especially multiparty democracies. For instance, the US has an exceptionally high number of citizens who identify at least somewhat with one party (CSE, 2020). If in-party false consensus is largely due to people feeling a need to agree with their party (resulting in either persuasion or projection), then it will be less prominent in other democracies simply because fewer people see any party as “theirs”.

It is likely that the tight connection between one’s own opinions and one’s in-party perceptions are part of what drives Americans’ impression of rising opinion polarization—over and above actual polarization (Westfall et al., 2015; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016). Moreover, new experimental evidence suggests that affective polarization is mainly caused by people assuming that parties’ policy positions are polarized (more than by caring about partisan social identities separate from policy, Orr and Huber 2020). Taken together, this suggests that affective polarization is partly driven by the inaccurate perception that our own party agrees with us, especially on the issues we feel most strongly about.

Further, results show that Americans’ perceptions of party stances vary widely, and are typically vastly different from reality. This has important consequences for our understanding of cue-taking. In cueing experiments, all respondents receive the same cue about the position of a political elite or group. My findings suggest that in reality, citizens either hear different messages about where the parties stand; or

they are motivated to distort those messages for cognitive comfort; or they may receive few (if any) of those messages, instead inferring the positions of the parties from their own. For that reason, the real-world effects of cues may be much more idiosyncratic than those observed “in the lab”.

Finally, the wild variation in answers to questions about parties’ agreement with policy statements has implications for democratic representation. The perceptions of high-knowledge citizens are more accurate—likely because they are more likely to have received partisan cues (Zaller et al., 1992). Still, when asked about their in-party’s policy stances, they give answers that have almost as much to do with their own opinion as with real stances. This does not fit well with a democratic model where parties, like candidates, are held accountable for the positions they take while in office.

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Ethics approval

Both studies in this paper were approved by COUHES, the Institutional Review Board at MIT.

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