Research on the Perception Gap Lesson

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Introduction[1]

      Political polarization is widely recognized as an ingrained, detrimental trait of American politics. While hardly a new phenomenon, the gap in political attitudes tied to partisan dispositions and ideological extremes has widened as its manifestations have become increasingly ominous. Political disagreements are now personal affronts which undermine people's respect for the political system and one another (Russell, 2024). The Perception Gap, political partisans' exaggerated opinions about their opponents and their issue positions, is a central element of the extant brand of political polarization.

      Overcoming the problems of partisan mistrust, declining faith in democracy and government institutions, uncivil discourse, and destructive political behavior instigated by polarization is no easy task. Civic education at the primary and secondary school levels offers a potential pathway for systematically addressing the problems associated with political polarization. High-quality classroom experiences have the potential to help young people develop accurate perspectives on the causes and consequences of polarization and offer possibilities for abatement (DiGiacomo, et al., 2021). Preparing elementary and secondary school students for life in a thriving democracy is crucial, as adolescence is a period of significant civic development. Students who receive quality civics training early in life are more likely to develop as responsible, engaged citizens (Kahne and Bowyer, 2017).

      This paper presents preliminary findings from high school teacher and student evaluations of a pilot study of the Perception Gap, a secondary school lesson developed by More Like US. The intervention seeks to increase students' understanding of political polarization and narrow the Perception Gap by highlighting similarities in the ways that Americans across the political spectrum think about issues. More Like US supports civil discourse efforts by providing resources and opportunities to teachers and schools, including the Perception Gap lesson that can be integrated into existing curricula. Teachers in the pilot study found that the lesson was readily implemented and was successful in debunking partisan misperceptions. Students gained an understanding of political polarization and became more empathetic towards others with whom they disagree.

The Perception Gap

      Partisan polarization has become a defining characteristic of the American political landscape (McCarty, 2019). The perception that political divides have been deepening and are insurmountable is a prevalent narrative among academics, journalists, government officials, and political practitioners that also has been embraced by the public. Historically negative views about political institutions and officials, distrust in the political process, declining faith in democracy, and political violence have been attributed to polarization. People who perceive minor differences between the political parties are the most satisfied with the state of democracy compared to those who feel the parties are highly polarized (Ridge, 2022). As the Republican and Democratic parties have become more ideologically distinct along with the candidates running under their banners, differences in the core beliefs of conservatives and liberals have

been expanding (Lassen, 2024). This partisan sorting has led to the assumption that the moderate middle is disappearing (Fiorina, 2017).

Studies have demonstrated that polarization is heavily driven by elites in politics whose viewpoints and issue stances have become more extreme over time (Hare and Poole, 2014; Fiorina, 2017; Yudkin, Hawkins, and Dixon, 2019; Enders, 2021). The media, including legacy sources, digital platforms, and social media, amplify and further distort the positions of elites. Analyses of American legislators' ideological views indicate that partisan issue positions have grown farther apart over a quarter century (Banda and Cluverius, 2018; Shor and McCarty, 2022). Elites provide cues to the partisan public that reflect their polarized issue positions, especially among people with higher levels of political interest (Hetherington, 2001; NOCR, 2012). An analysis of the rhetoric of members of the U.S. Congress during the COVID-19 pandemic found that Democrats emphasized the threat to public health and American workers while Republicans focused heavily on China as a source of the pandemic and the impact on businesses. These divergent cues aligned with a partisan divide in the public's views about the pandemic (Green, et al., 2020).

Polarization proliferates through legacy news and digital media channels. The news media have made polarization a central theme of their coverage. Reporting on individual politicians is framed in terms of partisan divisions that can be exaggerated (Robison, 2015). An analysis by More in Common found that individuals' media use habits reflected perceptions of partisan differences perpetuated by news organizations (Yudkin, Hawkins, and Dixon, 2019). Increasingly, the public's perceptions of parties and their identifiers are shaped by interactions with digital media sources, including online news, political sites, blogs, and podcasts. More than half of the American public regularly get news and information from social media (Pew Research Center, 2024). While social media are not the original causes of political polarization, the use of these platforms intensifies divisiveness. Social media platforms elevate and widely disseminate content that stokes partisan animosity and political extremism (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims, 2021; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021).

A more contested supposition maintains that the partisan gap in issue positions among the American public is vast and widening. This argument presumes that the electorate has become more politically engaged and thus more ideologically consistent and divided on issues (Abramowitz, 2017; Lassen, 2024). However, the assumption that issue polarization is prevalent among the mass public has been challenged. It assumes that the public is aware and knowledgeable about issues, which is hardly the case (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019; NORC, 2012). Evidence of a Perception Gap in political polarization in mounting. The Perception Gap represents the difference in "the extent to which Democrats and Republicans *think* they disagree with the amount they *actually* disagree" (Yudkin, Hawkins, and Dixon, 2019: 6). A Pew Research Center study found that nearly 80% of Biden and Trump supporters agreed with the statement: "Not only do we have different priorities when it comes to politics, but we fundamentally disagree about core American values" (Pew Research Center, 2020). The Perception Gap encompasses the notion of "false polarization," where partisans imagine that people on the other side of the political spectrum hold much more extreme views than they do in fact (Fernbach and Van Boven, 2021; Blatz and Mercier, 2017; Robinson, et al., 1995). Partisans believe that people identifying with the opposing party have more radical stances than those in

their own party (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016). Individuals who hold more intense views themselves are the most likely to attribute extreme issue positions to others (Van Boven, Judd, and Sherman, 2012). Partisans engaged in intergroup conflicts misperceive the degree of disagreement with their adversaries, especially on values-based issues central to their belief system, and underestimate shared views (Chambers, Baron, and Inman, 2006). People selectively learn information that conforms to their partisan worldview and are less likely to absorb content that challenges their beliefs (Jerit and Barabas, 2012).

The Perception Gap is perpetuated by the development of an "us" versus "them" mentality that reinforces a strong commitment to a political party and the development of extreme political attitudes (Westfall, et al., 2015). Meta-perception, the belief that people have about how others view them, is an element of the Perception Gap. Partisans imagine that their political rivals see them far more negatively than they really do (Fernbach and Van Boven, 2021). They tend to exaggerate the moral concerns of their own side relative to the opposition (Graham, Nosek, and Haidt, 2012). People also have exaggerated views about the composition of political parties and overestimate the extent to which partisans belong to party-stereotypical groups. Common misperceptions are that most people who identify as LGBTQ+ are Democrats, and that Republicans overwhelmingly come from high socio-economic backgrounds. These beliefs about out-party composition influence views about their issue stands which can exacerbate feelings of alienation (Ahler and Sood, 2018). These trends can lead to a "bias-perception conflict spiral," where partisan misperceptions drive conflict-escalating action, such as uncivil discourse in media, which in turn reinforces and amplifies the sense of bias (Kennedy and Pronin, 2008).

The increase in political divisiveness, real and perceived, coincides with the intensification of affective polarization. People have a strong affinity with those who share their partisan affiliation and extreme dislike and distrust of people aligned with the opposing political party. Affective polarization is not grounded firmly in issues, but in political identity. This social-emotional dimension of polarization is highly personalized, as partisans view their opponents as hypocritical, selfish, and closed minded. The consequences of affective polarization extend beyond the political realm, and can impact personal interactions, friendships, dating behavior, and even where people shop and dine (Iyengar, et al., 2019). Affective polarization is manifested by social distance, as people are reluctant to interact with those in their target outgroup. Aversion to the outgroup increases over time as negative appraisals of their traits intensify and are amplified through media. Incivility and intolerance escalate, as callous attitudes develop toward others and confrontational behavior—even violence—is normalized (McMurtrie, et al., 2024).

The Perception Gap Lesson Plan

The current era of contentious and divisive politics offers a critical opportunity for civic education to develop students' capacity to counter misinformation, negotiate conflict, and identify threats to a pluralistic democracy (Hurtado, 2019; Winthrop, 2020). Studies have shown that partisans across the ideological spectrum become more optimistic about negotiation and compromise on issues when they are presented with the actual views of their opponents rather than relying on assumed views (Sherman, Nelson, and Ross, 2003). Civics instruction can reaffirm democratic practices, including civil discourse and debate (Cohen, Pope, and Wong,

2021; Owen, 2024). Classroom discussion of difficult issues can prepare students to be responsibly engaged in community life (Halverson, Tucker, and Smith, 2024; McAvoy and Hess, 2013; Youniss, 2011). At the same time, teachers lament that they are not systematically supported in providing high-quality civic learning experiences that educate students about extreme political polarization. They express a need for professional development, lesson plans, and curricular materials to instruct students in "how to engage in civil and political dialogue with those of differing political perspectives, finding and sharing credible information online in ethical and productive ways, asking critical questions about our social and political systems, and taking informed action within those systems" (DiGiacomo, et al., 2021: 261).

More Like US is an organization aimed at narrowing "dangerous political "Perception Gaps" at scale by targeting the information environment, starting with Gen Z" (https://www.More Like US.org/). Founded by a bipartisan team with extensive experience in the political and policy realms and guided by a Social Science Advisory Council of university faculty, More Like US has three main initiatives. This paper focuses on the Perception Gap lesson plan for students designed to reduce political divisions, improve civil discourse, and counteract "feelings of threat that support illiberalism and authoritarianism" (https://www.More Like US.org/). The group's other initiatives are the ReCAST Network, a training program and collaboration for social media influencers, and Similarity Hub, a survey data aggregation tool that shows the overlapping viewpoints of Democrats and Republicans on hundreds of policy issues.

The Perception Gap lesson plan is a curricular intervention for high school (grades 9-12) government students that can be adapted for middle school students, college students, and adults. The lesson is designed to improve civil discourse and reduce political polarization by alleviating misunderstandings and erroneous generalizations about people who identify with an opposing political party. It addresses misperceptions that are associated with deeper threats, including dehumanization, eradication of democratic norms, and political violence. The rationale for the lesson plan is described as follows:

> This lesson can be used independently, with goals such as making more well-informed and less-polarized citizens who are also better able to discern if news reports about polarization in America are accurate. Separately, it is an excellent precursor or complement to civil discourse in the classroom. Civil discourse is enhanced when students have accurate views of what average Americans across the political spectrum think about various political topics. In the absence of lessons like this, students may have unnecessary anxiety about engaging in civil discourse, and/or overemphasize binary and fringe policy options (Coan, n.d.).

The Perception Gap intervention employs Decision Education, which emphasizes students' learning skills of judgement formation and decision-making. Students are taught "*how* to think, not *what* to think" (Alliance for Decision Education, n.d.). Decision Education prepares students to deal with an uncertain world and navigate complex problems by thinking probabilistically. Students gain confidence in understanding and working with numbers to guide predictions about future outcomes. They engage in skillful decision-making where they consider the risks, consequences, and benefits of potential options (Diamond and Lee, 2024).

The lesson piloted in this research was "Correcting Division Misperceptions," which was a winner of the Stanford Strengthening Democracy Challenge. The lesson focuses on the issue of immigration, although it can be adapted for other issues. It is designed to be implemented in a single (50-minute) class period. Teachers begin by making general points about the Republican and Democratic parties and their adherents, for example, that they take different policy positions. The introductory remarks can be adapted to accommodate students' facility with different levels of complexity. For a lesson focused on immigration, students are asked where they believe the average Republican and Democratic voter stands on opening borders to any immigrant and place sticky notes representing each party along a continuum representing opposing standpoints. The class then watches a three-and-a-half-minute video, "Correcting Division Misperceptions," which features people from across the political spectrum expressing their views about immigration and political partisans. The video uses survey data to demonstrate that perceptions about partisan differences are exaggerated and that people are more closely aligned than is commonly believed. The class then discusses their views on immigration within the context of the video. Teachers explain research findings that Americans tend to overestimate differences between the political parties, and that there are nearly 200 policy issues where majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents agree (Voice of the People, n.d.). They define the Perception Gap and explore with their students its causes and consequences. The lesson next examines how the Perception Gap is perpetuated by partisan stereotypes using immigration and other issue positions as examples. The class contemplates why misperception matters for democratic republics, as public debates turn hateful, and countries fall into cycles of deepening political polarization. While the lesson plan suggests that students read and discuss two articles pertaining to the Perception Gap, the teachers in the pilot study did not use these particular materials exclusively. Teachers have the option of an extension activity for a second class period and/or can assign a research homework exercise. Students can explore the Perception Gap more deeply by engaging with survey research. They can examine how understanding the importance of disagreement and debate based on actual differences, rather than misperceptions, are a part of democracy. (See the Appendix for the Perception Gap Lesson Plan.)

Pilot Study

The Perception Gap lesson was piloted in three high schools in the Washington, D.C. area in the spring of 2024. This research was based on secondary analysis of the pilot study data.[2] Data for the preliminary analysis were collected on three teachers and a total of 58 students who participated in the pilot program. One teacher used the lesson plan with two different classes (30 total students). Surveys were administered to teachers and students following the lesson. Teachers provided qualitative responses to questions about the content of the lesson, how it was implemented in the classroom, and perceived student outcomes. The student data were composed of a combination of open- and closed-ended questions. It assessed their thoughts about the content of the Perception Gap lesson and the impact the class session had on their understanding of and empathy towards other people's political behavior and views. The students responded to the survey items on an exit ticket following the intervention. Three of the classes—a total of 37 students—received similar surveys. A class of 21 students responded to a smaller number of items that mostly differed from those asked of the other classes.

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[2] The pilot study data were provided by James Coan, Executive Director, More Like US and Main Author of the Perception Gap Lesson Plan.

The pilot study teachers were provided with the lesson plan and supporting resources. Teachers gave favorable feedback on their experience with the lesson, which they all felt was aligned with their district- and school-level course goals. They reported following the lesson plan somewhat closely, as the intervention is meant to be adaptable. The lesson was modified by teachers adding content, such as a more extensive discussion of the concept of the Perception Gap, tailoring the lesson to fit into a wider curricular segment on public policy and immigration, and supplementing or replacing the suggested reading with relevant articles they selected. Teachers noted that students were able to follow the instructions in the lesson plan and had a good understanding of the immigration issue and politics. Consistent with the goals of Decision Education, a teacher indicated that students' grasp of the topic was robust enough to allow them to make a prediction about future outcomes. Teachers found that the students related to and were engaged by the short video on "Correcting Divisive Misconceptions." Students were attentive to the video, commented on it, and used the words of subjects in the video when processing their takeaways. One teacher commented, "[Discussion following the video] was constructive. They identified reasons why their perceptions might be wrong and the influence of the media." Teachers expected that the lesson would have a positive impact going forward, with one expressing the caveat that the influence may be short-lived. Another teacher stated: "I expect students will better be able to engage in civil discourse, now that they realize the "other side" is less extreme and now that they see many policy positions along the political spectrum rather than binaries."

Teachers offered constructive suggestions for future iterations of the intervention. In some instances, students may not have sufficient content background about political parties and their policy agendas. They would benefit from a detailed discussion about parties and other core constructs prior to the Perception Gap lesson. Additional active learning elements, such as "talk and turn" and small group work, might be integrated into the lesson plan. Versions of the lesson might be created for different grade bands and student populations, such as Advanced Placement classes.

Feedback was solicited from students after the lesson. Students in all four classes were asked about the overall quality of the lesson plan in terms of it being clear and easy to follow. Three of the classes were asked if the material was presented in a fair and politically balanced /nonpartisan way. Additional items measured student outcomes based on agreement with the statements: 1) The lesson helped me better understand Americans' political views and behavior and 2) The lesson motivated me to be more empathetic towards those whose political views I disagree with. Students responded that they strongly agreed, agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each statement. A sensitivity analysis revealed no significant differences in responses based on teacher or class.

Students' assessments of the Perception Gap lesson were overwhelmingly positive. Three-quarters of the students agreed that the lesson plan was clear and easy to follow, with 31% agreeing strongly. (See Table 1.) The vast majority of students (86%) felt that the material was presented in a fair, politically balanced, and nonpartisan way; only 8% disagreed. The influence of the single Perception Gap lesson on civic orientations was the most notable finding. Students overwhelmingly indicated that the lesson helped them to better understand Americans' political views and behavior (81%), while 13% were unsure and 6% disagreed. Seventy percent of

students were motivated by the lesson to be more empathetic toward those with whom they disagree politically, 27% were unsure, and 3% disagreed. A small number of students noted that their understanding of political views and empathy toward others did not change much because they already had a good base understanding of the causes and consequences of the Perception Gap. The influence of the family on providing this foundation was cited by two students.

Table 1
Student Assessments of the Perception Gap Lesson

	Lesson plan was clear and easy to follow	Material was fair and balanced	Better understand political views	Motivated me to be more empathetic
Strongly Agree	31%	43%	35%	24%
Agree	45%	43%	46%	46%
Neither	19%	6%	13%	27%
Disagree	2%	5%	3%	3%
Strongly Disagree	3%	3%	3%	--
n	58	37	37	37

The open-ended items revealed deeper insights into students' takeaways from the Perception Gap lesson. Students generally enjoyed the lesson and felt that it was informative, engaging, and easy to understand. They reported that the material was very balanced, that the information was presented fairly, and that it displayed the opinions of both parties equally. They liked the opening learning activity where they placed sticky notes representing the political parties on the immigration issue continuum. Feedback on the video was overwhelmingly positive, and some students would have liked additional videos explaining polarization and partisan stereotyping in greater depth. They liked the supporting materials, including the More In Common website. Some students would have appreciated additional time for discussion, debate, examining data trends, and sharing their own issue positions. They suggested that more emphasis could be placed on social media and polarization given the relevance to their daily lives. The environment and climate change were mentioned as alternatives or additions to immigration as the issue example used in the lesson.

It was clear that the lesson was successful in conveying the key points about political polarization and the Perception Gap. A prominent theme in the open-ended responses emphasized the insights students gained into how views of political parties can be distorted. (See Figure 1.) Students noted the level of antipathy that partisans have toward the opposition and expressed some surprise at the amount of common ground that exists. The dehumanizing impact of polarization was mentioned by several students. The media's contribution to polarization also was cited. Some respondents reflected on their own experiences in relation to the Perception Gap. A comment illustrates how students inferred broader civic virtues from the lesson: "I guess it showed the classroom perception of where both Republicans and Democrats lie on the graph (for open, and close borders). But it just shows that productive dialogue is necessary for tolerance and understanding for one another." At the same time, some students indicated that there were limits to the extent that they could be empathetic toward others. One student stated:

"It is hard for me to be more empathetic when some people who don't support my ideas don't support me as a person." Another reflected: "I don't really feel empathetic towards the other group because their opinions are really bad sometimes, like racism." Finally, the relationship of family to political polarization was mentioned. The experience of students coming from families who identify with different political parties is something that might be considered in the lesson plan going forward.

Figure 1
Student Takeaways about the Perception Gap

> ➢ I learned that in reality, the opposing political party individuals are not as extreme as I thought.
> ➢ It was fascinating to me that both parties feel so strongly about one another, I have even fallen guilty to that. However, after this lesson I feel a lot more sympathetic and less nervous about political conflicts. The other party definitely is just as conflicted about a subject as we are. We are all humans.
> ➢ That people who vote different from how I do does not mean that they have extreme values against my own. By getting to know them and learning about their beliefs beyond just their party lines makes them seem far less radical.
> ➢ It showed me that Republicans and Democrats really aren't that different.
> ➢ I thought it was interesting to see the views of other parties and it helped me understand the bias that goes into them.
> ➢ I feel like most Americans, myself included, know how polarized the political landscape is, and that both parties represent the other as the scum of the Earth in order to advance their parties agenda.
> ➢ It was surprising to see how the other parties assumed such extreme things about the other, and even that some said the other parties isn't human.
> ➢ The most interesting thing that I saw is that there is more common ground with Democrats and Republicans about the border. I would've thought that the Republicans and Democrats would be more far apart with their opinions.
> ➢ We should look to de-party our views on each other instead of focusing on moving through biases.
> ➢ I guess it showed the classroom perception of where both Republican and Democrats lie on the graph (for open, and close borders). But it just shows that productive dialogue is necessary for tolerance and understanding for one another.
> ➢ The most important thing I learned in this lesson would have to be that most people's opinions and views are not as extreme as the media makes it seem.
> ➢ I feel that since I come from a very politically diverse family it has always helped me to understand each party, and the different levels of each party, especially living in Fauquier county.
> ➢ It [the lesson] agreed with what I know with my family because some of them are Republicans and some are Democrats but we still get along.

The topic of partisan stereotyping as presented in the lesson was especially compelling to students. (See Figure 2.) They were surprised to learn that many Democrats believe Republicans

are highly represented among the wealthiest Americans when this is not the case. They also were intrigued by the fact that educated Democrats were the most likely to ascribe to this partisan stereotype while people who are the least politically engaged had the most accurate perspectives about the parties. Students cited specific statistics which is an indication of the strength of this aspect of the lesson. One student provided a detailed discussion of partisan stereotyping based on what was covered in the lesson:

> The overestimation from both sides. One party will always assume an overestimate about the other party. For example, "Just 2% of Republicans earn at least US$250,000 per year – after all, that's roughly the economic 1%. But the average respondent conjectured that 38% of GOP supporters earn that much. The typical Democratic guess was near 45%" (Ahler). These overestimates are way wrong, and both parties overestimate and boost numbers way beyond what they actually are to try and prove a point. Most people are "normal" when it comes to elections, and each of them most likely have a sure fire reason to believe the things that they believe. People are heavily influenced by the "extreme" believers, thus believing that the whole of the other party is just like those "extreme" believers. That is not the case. These extreme believers are broadcasted all over social media, when most of the accounts that post those types of things, are extremely biased to their own party. Therefore, they are posting on media to try and bring down the other party.

Figure 2
Student Takeaways about Partisan Stereotyping

> ➢ I think the results of the graphs were pretty interesting because they showed how obvious it is that people play into stereotypes so strongly.
> ➢ The most interesting thing I learned about was the experiment where they told Republicans and Democrats percentages that cleared stereotypes and how it affected their attitudes towards people with other opinions.
> ➢ The different markers of the perception gap, such as wealth and religion, and the actual stats were not what I expected.
> ➢ I learned that a lot of Democrats believe Republicans are part of the 1% wealth group, which to me when I think of a quintessential Republican, I think of a country farmer who is not super rich, so it intrigues me that people believe that Republicans are super rich.
> ➢ The most surprising thing I learned today was that some Democrats believe that nearly half of all Republicans earn over $250,000 per year. In actuality, it's only about two percent of Republicans that earn this much.
> ➢ I was surprised that more educated Democrats have a higher perception gap
> ➢ The most interesting thing was the fact that people least engaged in politics had the most correct ideals of each party.
> ➢ I found the friendship chart interesting--particularly the flatness of the Republican line vs. the steep Democrat line.

Students in one class were asked: Did this lesson change your perceptions at all about Democrats and Republicans? Of the 21 respondents, 24% indicated that the lesson changed their perceptions, 24% were not sure, and 52% stated that their views were unchanged. On their own, the responses to this item are somewhat difficult to interpret, as there is no record of students' perceptions of the parties before the lesson. However, when paired with students' responses to an item asking them to identify the key takeaways from the lesson, some clear patterns were evident. (See Figure 3.) All students who answered "yes" to the question expressed more positive perceptions about the parties. They noted that the parties are not as extreme as popular perceptions would suggest. Instead, the media contribute to political polarization by privileging the extreme views of a small number of people. Key takeaways of students who responded that they were not sure if the lesson changed their perspective were that people should be open to the views of others and that differences of opinion should not be divisive. One student noted that the nation's collective political mindset is more alike than we are led to believe. Students whose views about the parties remained unchanged by the lesson expressed similar sentiments to their classmates. It may be the case that these students came to the lesson aware that views of the parties are embellished.

Figure 3
Students' Key Takeaways
by Their Perception of Parties Following the Lesson

Students' Perception of the Parties Was Changed by the Lesson

➢ That the other party is not as extreme as we are led to believe.
➢ The polarization between the two political parties is constructed by the media and how they twist truths
➢ The portrayal of Democrats and Republicans by the media and society is not representative of the parties themselves.
➢ One key takeaway was that both sides of the Democratic and Republican party think that the other side is very, very extreme; however, in reality only one or two people have extreme views and everyone else in that party is kind of in the middle.
➢ A key takeaway is that people with the most extreme values are the ones ending up on the news and in papers causing the other political party to think that the party is very extreme, but it is just false.

Students' Perception of the Parties Was Not Changed by the Lesson

➢ People are very quick to make assumptions about others.
➢ The other party is not as extreme as we all think they are.
➢ Were think more alike than differently.
➢ That the other political party thinks that the view about them is very bad.
➢ That both sides have an extreme view of one another.
➢ It doesn't matter what political party you identify with, your views can mix.
➢ There are a lot of overlaps between people and parties, it's just people don't communicate.
➢ Perceptions are not reality.

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Students were asked if they had any questions remaining after the Perception Gap lesson and if there were things that they wanted to learn more about. The responses suggested that the students were engaged by the lesson and wanted to go deeper. (See Figure 4.) Students were interested in learning more about the underlying causes of the Perception Gap. They wanted to know why people had such extreme opinions about and hatred of the other side. One respondent wondered why American politics is so polarized when the public is notably less politically divided. Students suggested adding some contextual information to the lesson, such as longitudinal data on polarization and the influence of polarization on elections, that could enhance their understanding of current trends. They also were interested in learning more about media bias and its relationship to polarization. Finally, students wanted guidance about how they might counter political polarization and the Perception Gap. They asked about how to communicate with people with whom they disagree and how partisan stereotyping might be mitigated. Some students raised misinformation as a problem that they wanted to address. In addition, two questions were posed that could frame broader discussions around the Perception Gap and its relevance: How does this impact me as a student? And what can we do for the next generation?

Figure 4
Students' Post-Lesson Questions and Suggestions

Underlying Causes of the Perception Gap

➢ If United States citizens aren't as polarized as people think, then why are our politics still absurdly polarized? It seems that maybe the people aren't as polarized, but the people then elect candidates who strictly conform to party standards and then push polarized politics into the local, state, and federal government.
➢ Why do people think so extremely of the other side?
➢ Why do people feel so much hatred toward their opposing party?
➢ What is the reasoning behind choosing or not choosing a side, either Republican or Democrat. What are the aspects that intrigue a person to pick side?
➢ What causes people to be so mean to everyone else???
➢ What are the motivations of extremists, and what influences them to feel that way?

Contextual Content
➢ When did this polarization really become so pronounced?   ➢ How do the present statistics compare to those of 20, 30 plus year ago?   ➢ How does political polarization affect election seasons and attitudes towards politics?   ➢ I would like to learn more about other opinions and data about Republicans and Democrats in different scenarios to see the difference.   ➢ I'd like to learn more about the bias of news sources, like which news sources lean which way so we can take that into account when we hear or see it.   ➢ Would listening to two news outlets, like Fox and CNN lower the perception gap?
Countering the Perception Gap
➢ I probably would want to learn more about how we as people can learn to be more open and abolish those biased thoughts and be more open to everyone's opinion.   ➢ Learning about how to communicate with people outside my political views.   ➢ How can we limit the amount of misinformation being broadcasted to avoid less accurate votes? I believe that if this fake media continues to be posted, it will persuade people to believe in something they don't actually believe.   ➢ How can people learn to accept other political parties and move away from believing stereotypes so harshly?   ➢ How does this impact me as a student?   ➢ What can we do for the next generation?

Conclusion

The pilot study of the Perception Gap lesson offers support, albeit on a small scale, for the possibility that civic education has the potential to be an effective conduit for countering polarization in American politics. The module exemplifies the characteristics of a high-quality intervention. The lesson plan includes sufficient content and directions for teachers about implementing the lesson in the classroom. Teachers were able to adapt the lesson to fit their curricular needs and instructional strengths. The lesson included active learning elements, such as the opening exercise, which are known to enhance learning. The pilot study found that teachers had a favorable impression of the lesson. Their students were attentive and engaged by the class and gained greater understanding of political polarization. Teachers felt that the lesson had a positive impact in terms of creating awareness of the Perception Gap and enhancing students' civil discourse skills.

In line with their teachers' assessment, students' evaluations of the lesson were complimentary. Students found the materials to be fair to both political parties. Their reports of the key takeaways reflected the goals of the intervention. They became familiar with the Perception Gap, a new concept to most students, and how beliefs about partisan extremism among the public are less prevalent than is commonly held. They were especially receptive to the evidence of partisan stereotyping that was presented. Students expressed an interest in learning more about the underlying causes of the Perception Gap and historical trends. They wanted to

develop strategies for countering polarization. The Perception Gap lesson was administered during a single 50-minute class period, after which students reported that the lesson increased their understanding of Americans' political views and behavior while making them more empathetic towards those with whom they disagree. While the immediate impact of the lesson may dissipate over time, it provides a foundation upon which subsequent instruction can build.

This secondary analysis of pilot data provides insights to inform a larger, quasi-experimental study planned for the current academic year. The pilot study relied on post-intervention questionnaires administered to teachers and students. The teacher responses provided substantive information about the implementation of the module and suggestions for future iterations of the lesson. More detailed information about pedagogies and instructional approaches employed by the teachers should be collected going forward. Improvements to the student data collection are more substantial. A pretest/posttest design will allow for better assessment of the student outcomes by comparing baseline data to responses following the lesson. Survey items, which are in development, will be more specific and measure students' acquisition of knowledge and dispositions related to the Perception Gap. The study will be administered to a larger, more diverse sample of schools, teachers, and students. This next iteration of the research should provide a richer analysis of the Perception Gap lesson that can be extrapolated to related interventions.

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APPENDIX

Perception Gap Lesson Plan

Main Author[3]: James Coan, James@More Like US.org

Background

Duration: 50 minutes

Topics: Partisanship, Perception Gap, Partisan Misperceptions, Stereotyping, News Analysis

Grades: 9-12 (potentially modifiable for grades 6-8)

Rationale

The Perception Gap represents various misunderstandings and incorrect generalizations of those who generally identify with and/or tend to vote for another political party. Many researchers have found we are more similar across the political spectrum than often perceived. The Strengthening Democracy Challenge led by Stanford shows correcting aspects of this Perception Gap is more effective than nearly any other scaleable intervention at reducing factors associated with risks of democratic breakdown. (Note that this document uses the term "Perception Gap," coined by More in Common, an organization that has conducted substantial survey work in this space. However, one can substitute it for a more precise term like "partisan misperceptions" if preferred.)

This lesson can be used independently, with goals such as making more well-informed and less-polarized citizens who are also better able to discern if news reports about polarization in America are accurate. Separately, it is an excellent precursor or complement to civil discourse in the classroom. Civil discourse is enhanced when students have accurate views of what average Americans across the political spectrum think about various political topics. In the absence of lessons like this, students may have unnecessary anxiety about engaging in civil discourse, and/or overemphasize binary and fringe policy options.

Materials Needed

- Two sticky notes for each student, preferably one red and one blue
- A white board or other large flat surface
- A/V equipment to show a short video
- A way for students to read a couple of articles (either printed out or on a screen)

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[3] This lesson plan was reviewed by Dr. Jeffrey Lees, a PhD in social psychology with a focus on the Perception Gap and meta-perceptions who is now a postdoc at Princeton University, and Jessi Hollis McCarthy, an expert in media literacy curriculum design.

Pre-lesson Prep

- Decide whether the example used in the lesson will be on immigration (default) or democratic values and principles (alternate)
- Read the section "Notes and Background Information for Teachers," in addition to the Lesson Plan
- Post video and article links to the virtual classroom

Lesson Plan

1. Prior to class, draw a number line on a whiteboard, with an x-axis stretching from zero to 100, with at least a midpoint shown at 50. Put two sticky notes on each desk, preferably with two different colors (ideally a Red and a Blue sticky note).[4]
2. To start the class, make general points about the main political parties and their typical preferences, depending on the background of the students. This can include saying that those who tend to vote for Democratic or Republican candidates do tend to have somewhat different policy preferences on topics such as size / scope of government, social issues, foreign policy, and immigration. Regarding immigration, since it is relevant for the subsequent exercise (default option),[5] feel free to choose just how much information to give:
   a. One option is to start in a binary and complicate the picture later (e.g., only saying at this point that Republicans tend to be more concerned about immigration than Democrats).
   b. Another approach involves providing complexity at the start (e.g., Republicans and Democrats both tend to support at least some level of high-skilled immigrants like doctors and scientists, but Republicans tend to be more concerned about immigration than Democrats, especially regarding immigrants who enter the country without documentation / illegally).
3. Explain how students should use their sticky notes on the number line. Zero stands for completely open borders to any immigrant, and 100 stands for completely closed borders preventing all immigration. At their desks, have students privately write on their blue sticky note (or whatever color represents Democrats) the number along this number line where they think an average Democratic voter is. Similarly, on their red sticky note (or whatever color represents Republicans), they should write the number corresponding to the average

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[4] With this method, it is possible that students will try to figure out if other students are "correct," which may distract from the lesson plan. If you are concerned about this outcome, responses could be collected before class, although this would require the teacher manually posting on the whiteboard or graphing the results to show to the class. A technologically-advanced class could in theory avoid any problem by having students anonymously input their answers, with data being graphed quickly or in real time, though this lesson does not explore the technology needed for this option.

[5] If immigration is a particularly problematic topic for your students, see the section "Notes and Background Information for Teachers" for an option to do this exercise about democratic values and principles instead.

Republican voter along the number line. Once all students have finished writing the numbers on each sticky note, they should walk up to the number line and place their sticky notes along it.

4. Have students watch the 3.5-minute video "Correcting Division Misperceptions."

5. Discuss the sticky note exercise and video. Potentially ask some preliminary discussion questions, such as those below.[6]
    a. Did you also have misconceptions about immigration (or another topic chosen for this lesson), like the people in the video and the Americans who took the survey?
    b. What do you think are some causes of the Perception Gap, when Americans overestimate differences between average members of each political party? What reasons did the video give for these misconceptions?
    c. What are some negative consequences of the Perception Gap?

6. Explain that many researchers find that Americans tend to overestimate differences between the political parties on numerous political topics besides immigration (see More in Common's Perception Gap report), and also in terms of democratic values[7] (see Starts With Us Common Ground Revealed data on YouTube and at the end of this webpage) and demographic characteristics (see this paper from Ahler and Sood). Feel free to note that researchers have found nearly 200 policy topics on which majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents agree (see Common Ground of the American People). Define the Perception Gap as various distorted views of those in the other political party, often overestimating differences between parties.

7. Explore how partisan stereotypes feed this Perception Gap. Start with a definition of stereotypes, "a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person." Many but not all partisan stereotypes start with a "kernel of truth," like general tendencies among Democrats to be more open to immigration than Republicans. However, people often overgeneralize extreme positions, so something that is true for a relatively small number of voters (e.g., absolutist positions of 100% closed or open borders) is seen as much more common than it really is. People also assume sameness – believing all or nearly all members of a party believe something, fit certain demographic profiles, or act in certain ways – rather than this just being true for a much smaller number of supporters of a party.

8. Explore why these misperceptions matter for democratic republics. More in Common's Perception Gap report overview has a clear explanation: "Why does this matter? Because

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[6] To make sure there is time to finish the lesson, this discussion can be relatively brief, with time left at the end to have a more complete discussion.

[7] It may be necessary to provide a definition or examples of these democratic values. In this study, the following values were tested: a government that is accountable to the people, fair and equal application of the rule of law, a government that represents the people it serves, learning from the past to improve our country, personal responsibility and accountability, respect and compassion across differences. It may also help to explain that these are different from partisan positions on specific issue areas, like immigration covered earlier.

when Democrats and Republicans believe their opponents hold extreme views, they become more threatened by each other. They start seeing each other as enemies, and start believing they need to win at all costs. They make excuses for their own side cheating and breaking the rules to beat the other side. And as our public debates become more hateful, many...tune out altogether. This is how countries fall into a cycle of deepening polarization, and how democracies die."

9. Have students read or take a look at one or more articles, in the context of the Perception Gap. While reading, ask them to note one activity or point mentioned in the articles that they think is helpful for combatting partisan misconceptions.
   a. *CBS News*, ["Braver Angels: Seeking to De-polarize America"](#)
   b. *The Conversation*, ["Something Democrats and Republicans Have in Common: Exaggerated Stereotypes About Both Parties"](#)

10. After students have completed the reading, ask questions such as the following:
    a. How do students feel about the word "chasm" in the first paragraph of the *CBS News* article?
    b. Is *The Conversation* article from a journalist, or an opinion piece by a researcher supported by data?

11. Before cleaning up the classroom, please take a picture of the whiteboard with the sticky notes and email it to [James@More Like US.org](mailto:James@MoreLikeUS.org). This helps to determine the extent to which students have misperceptions before the lesson. In this email, feel free to give feedback on what worked well and/or less well, as More Like US refines the lesson and evaluates its effectiveness.

Optional Extension Research Activity

This extension activity is for a second class period on the topic, and/or for a research homework assignment.

1. Have students explore one or more of the following questions:
   a. Where are there actual, substantive disagreements between the parties? There are still differences between the parties, even if Americans tend to overestimate these differences.
   b. What are other examples of the Perception Gap?

2. Give students an opportunity to engage with articles or survey research, with a couple of the following options:
   a. Have students conduct research on the question(s), providing guidance on the likely locations where relevant information can be found (e.g., Pew, Gallup, [More in Common](#), Voice of the People's [Revealing Common Ground](#))
   b. Provide one or more articles or data sources about the Perception Gap.[8]

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[8] More Like US provides a resource on its website with a list of existing research on the Perception Gap.

3. Have students list at least three policies or ideas the parties substantially disagree on and/or at least three policies where there is overlap between the parties.
4. Have students share their findings.
5. Emphasize to students the importance of seeking disagreement based on actual differences, not misperceived and overestimated differences. Note that disagreement is necessary for democracy; the problem is overestimating and misperceiving the extent of the disagreement. The parties are not the same, and everyone does not agree with one another. We disagree, debate, and vote, rather than engage in violence in order to achieve political ends. It is unhelpful to debate about imagined differences.