

Naïve Realism and Affirmative Action: Adversaries are More Similar Than They Think

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Research on “naïve realism” has shown that opposing partisans in political debates overestimate the dissimilarity in their views. These studies explore and extend this “false polarization” phenomenon in the context of affirmative action. Study 1 showed that partisans on both sides of the affirmative action debate greatly overestimate the liberalism of proponents and the conservatism of opponents. Study 2 extended this finding by showing that both sides similarly overestimate the ideological consistency of the two sides with respect to other policy issues such as abortion and immigration. Study 3 demonstrated an implication of these results by showing that adversaries were more optimistic about negotiation when they were exposed to the actual rather than the assumed views of their counterparts. Discussion centers on strategies for reducing false polarization and its impact on dispute resolution, and the relevance of these findings for the affirmative action debate.

“The debate over affirmative action often seems to involve two warring camps, each of which stakes a mutually exclusive claim to moral virtue. Defenders of affirmative action cast themselves as the champions of racial justice and the keepers of Dr. King’s dream. Opponents of affirmative action cast themselves as champions of the true color-blind intent of cherished American values.” (Bobo, 1998; p. 985)

One characteristic of the debate over affirmative action in university settings is the shared perception of a deep and unbridgeable chasm. As sociologist Lawrence Bobo (1998) observed, proponents of affirmative action tend to see those who oppose the policy as conservative reactionaries who want to set back the tide of racial progress and limit minority access to education. Opponents of affirmative action tend to see those

who support the policy as liberals who want to compromise standards and create an unfair system that promotes minority interests over the interests of fairness. Given such intergroup perceptions, it is not surprising that the affirmative action debate is often marked by acrimony and mutual distrust.

Although differences of opinion between the proponents and opponents of affirmative action no doubt reflect some important differences in political priorities and ideology, the research to be reported in this article explores the hypothesis that in this debate, as in many other contentious political debates, the differences in question may be smaller and less predictable, and the amount of common ground may be greater, than the adversaries recognize. This hypothesis derives from a more general account of naïve realism offered by Ross and Ward (1996; see also Griffin & Ross, 1991; Ichheiser, 1949; Pronin, Puccio, & Ross, 2002) and is directly prompted by related research on false polarization (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995; Keltner & Robinson, 1997).

Theoretical accounts of naïve realism describe how people reconcile their own perspective of the world with how they see the perspective of others. The general contention is

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that people tend to believe (or, often, to assume without giving the matter much thought) that they see objects of perception and evaluation as they really are, i.e., that they see not only physical objects, but also issues and events in a uniquely accurate, objective, and essentially unmediated, bottom-up fashion. To the extent that others fail to share such views, the naïve realist infers that those others lack information and, therefore, should fall into line as they become more enlightened. If others have failed to see the light even after they have been exposed to the facts, then the naïve realist infers that those others are seeing things through the prism of ideology, self-interest, group interest, or some other distorting top-down influence.

In relation to the affirmative action debate, then, people who support the policy tend to view their support as being based on the continued existence of race and gender differences in employment and opportunity (Clayton & Crosby, 1992; Crosby, 1989). They see their support as the product of a careful and objective evaluation of the situation, whereas that same support is characterized by opponents of affirmative action as the product of knee-jerk liberalism or group interests (Bobo, 1998). In contrast, opponents of affirmative action often see their opposition as reflective of an evaluation of the fairness of the proposal in accordance with basic American values (Sniderman & Piazza, 1993), whereas that same opposition is characterized by affirmative action supporters as reflective of racism (Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Drout, 1994) or high levels of prejudice and the desire to maintain hegemonic advantage (Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996; Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Nosworthy, Lea, & Lindsay, 1995). In other words, both opponents and proponents feel that their views are based on evaluations of the evidence, whereas the other side's views are based on ideology or self-interest.

Our analysis of partisans in the affirmative action debate does not suggest that individuals see themselves as totally dispassionate observers about this highly contentious issue. People do recognize, sometimes, that their particular individual experiences and social identities have influenced their political beliefs and priorities. However, they feel that, in their own case, such experiences and identities, whether as victims of racist bias or as victims of affirmative action, serve as a source of enlightenment (Crosby, 1989), whereas their adversaries' unique experiences and identities serve as a source of bias and distortion.

Such asymmetric attributions about own and others' views lead people to the assumption that others—especially others on the other side of an issue like affirmative action—will be ideologically consistent and relatively extreme. That is, having inferred that ideological or motivational bias is shaping the views of others on the policy, partisans assume that those same sources of bias will make their impact felt in other judgments that pertain to the same ideology or are subject to the same individual or group interests. By contrast, the naïve realist is aware that his or her own views on an issue as important and controversial as affirmative action tend to be complex, nuanced, and even somewhat ambivalent—perhaps combining support for the goals that underlie

affirmative action with resistance to implementation of some of the specific policies that prove necessary to achieve those goals (Kluegel & Smith, 1983). Indeed, such complexity and ambivalence reinforces the notion that one's own views have resulted from a bottom-up consideration of facts and arguments rather than mere ideology and self-interest.

What the partisan fails to appreciate is the fact that other people, and in particular those on the other side of the issue, hold similarly complex views and mixed feelings. The result of the asymmetry that we have described is apt to be a “false polarization” of beliefs—where the opposing parties in a given social debate overestimate the ideological consistency and extremity of each other's views, and accordingly also overestimate the gap between their side and the other side (Robinson et al., 1995).

This research was designed to meet two specific goals. First we sought to extend the findings of naïve realism to the heated affirmative action debate by showing some of the specific misperceptions and sources of false polarization that arise in the context of that debate. Second, we sought to demonstrate that when prospects for negotiation may be dimmed by the assumed false polarization in beliefs, when partisans are confronted with the actual views of their opponents (which are more similar to their own than they think), they are apt to see much more common ground between the sides and be much more optimistic about negotiating their differences.

UNDERSTANDING THE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION DEBATE

The debate over affirmative action is often characterized as highly polarized and divisive (Bobocel et al., 1998; Bobo, 1998; Crosby, 1994). Although most of the research has focused on personality or status differences between the antagonists in the affirmative action debate, investigators who have focused on the nature and dynamics of the debate itself have highlighted a very different source of disagreement. They have pointed out that the debate is often fueled by confusion and misunderstanding, even on the part of those who have been charged with implementing affirmative action policies or those who attended educational programs (Goldsmith, Cordova, Dwyer, Langlois, & Crosby, 1989). Indeed, highly variable definitions of affirmative action are apparent even in the writings of social scientists (Smith & Crosby, 1994).

Most importantly in terms of our present concerns, and in seeming contradiction to the characterization of the affirmative action debate as a contest between liberal progressives and conservative reactionaries, there is evidence that many people express contradictory or ambivalent attitudes. As noted before, many individuals support the goals that underlie affirmative action, but are against specific policies necessary to achieve those goals (Kluegel & Smith, 1983). As a result such individuals will find themselves classified in one camp or the other, depending on the specific nature of the survey questions posed (Murrell et al., 1994).

Misunderstandings and misperceptions in the affirmative action debate may further result from the participants' reluctance to reveal the ambiguity, complexity, or uncertainty of their views (Ross & Ward, 1995). In a contentious debate, doubts and uncertainties could be viewed as a sign of weakness or as a lack of conviction (Ross & Ward, 1995). Even when individuals are not strategically concealing sources of doubt or uncertainty, their inner conflicts may not be as transparent as they believe (Gilovich, Savitsky, & Medvec, 1998; Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999). Individuals thus appear more confident, both to their own side and the opposing side, than they really are. These biases can result in a kind of pluralistic ignorance (Miller, Monin, & Prentice, 2000), in which identical behaviors are interpreted as diagnostic of unique feelings. In the context of the affirmative action debate, we thus expect to find that participants on both sides of the issue can see the ambivalence of their own views, but interpret others as extreme and inflexible. Taken together, these effects should result in the perception of large differences of opinion, whereas in reality those differences are small or nonexistent (Puccio & Ross, 2000; see also Van Boven, 2000).

PERCEIVED VERSUS ACTUAL DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL BELIEFS

Larger perceived differences than actual ones in political debate have been reported in a number of earlier studies. Dawes, Singer, and Lemons (1972) found that hawks and doves during the Vietnam War era exaggerated the extremity of each other's actual views. False polarization results were reported by Robinson et al. (1995) with respect to the issue of abortion and with respect to perceptions of the racially charged Howard Beach case. Keltner and Robinson (1997) found that revisionist and traditionalist English professors agreed on a far larger number of books to be used in an introductory English course than they thought they would. Farwell and Weiner (2000) similarly found that liberals and conservatives agreed more than had been assumed about the amount of money that should be allocated to help the needy.¹

We expected similar false polarization and underestimation of others' ambivalence in the context of the affirmative action debate. Beyond documenting this phenomenon, the purpose of the first two studies was to provide more direct evidence that false polarization is linked to assumptions about the ideological basis for other's views and resulting expectations of ideological consistency. A third study examined a potentially important consequence of naïve realism in general and the false polarization effect in particular—that is, unwarranted pessimism about the prospects of finding

common ground with the “other side” on the affirmative action issue through discussion and negotiation.

STUDY 1: ACTUAL VERSUS PERCEIVED DIFFERENCES IN THE POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PROPONENTS AND OPPONENTS

The conceptual analysis we have offered leads to the prediction that both proponents and opponents of affirmative action will overestimate the degree to which the two sides hold ideologically consistent positions. More specifically, we predict that participants (both proponents and opponents of affirmative action) will believe that there is a greater difference in ideology between opponents and proponents than is actually the case. To test this prediction, we measure the self-described political liberalism versus conservatism of affirmative action proponents and opponents, and examine the estimates they make about the mean political positions of both of those who share and those who do not share their stance on affirmative action. As we noted earlier, research on the affirmative action debate (like the debate itself) is often muddled by confusion about the ameliorative policies under consideration (see Smith & Crosby, 1994; Murrell et al., 1994; Goldsmith et al., 1989; Esses & Seligman, 1996). To minimize the confusion of subjective interpretation of the affirmative action issue, the participants in our three studies were presented with questions not about affirmative action in general, but about a specific affirmative action plan proposed for implementation at their own university—an institution that already gives some weight to race in its ongoing efforts to increase minority representation.

After reading the proposal and answering a series of questions about it, participants were first asked to estimate the political ideology (liberal vs. conservative) of other students who either supported or rejected that proposal, and then to report their own political ideology. Our prediction was that the actual difference in the political ideology of supporters and rejecters would be significantly smaller than they assumed.

Method

Participants

A total of 78 undergraduates (45 women and 29 men)² at Stanford University completed the questionnaires in their dorm rooms in exchange for a small, nonmonetary gift.

¹We also have unpublished data suggesting similar false polarization in the actual versus perceived political views of Israeli hawks and doves, and of former East versus West German citizens, as well as in the views of undergraduate male students and female students about each other.

²Four participants did not report their sex. In Study 1, we conducted preliminary analyses that investigated sex differences on the major dependent measures and found that men and women did not differ in their support for the policy or their beliefs about opponents and proponents of affirmative action. The sex of the participants was not recorded for Studies 2 and 3, and consequently, sex will not be mentioned further.

Procedure

A questionnaire presented a hypothetical affirmative action proposal aimed at increasing minority admission to the university. The proposal described a wealthy alumnus who purportedly was willing to subsidize admission of 100 minority students for the entering class of the year 2000 by paying all expenses for these 100 students incurred by the university (scholarships, additional residence costs, etc.) for a 10-year period—an amount estimated to be roughly \$20 million, or \$20,000 per student per year for 10 years.³ It stated that the university would select 100 students, all members of disadvantaged and/or stigmatized groups including African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans, and all having “good grades, good character, and the potential to contribute significantly to their own communities and to American society at large.”

Dependent Measures

Participants were asked to complete a 9-point scale (ranging from *definitely adopt* to *definitely reject*) indicating what they thought that the university should do in response to the proposal. On this basis, we designated one group as *supporters* (i.e., those checking 1 to 4 on the scale), a second group as *rejecters* (i.e., those checking from 6 to 9 on the scale), and a third group (i.e., those who checked the midpoint of the scale) as *neutrals*. Participants were also asked to estimate the percentage of undergraduate students at the university who would recommend that the university adopt versus reject the proposal in question.

The next question, which was the key one in Study 1, dealt with assumptions about political ideology. It asked the participants to estimate where “people who would advocate that Stanford adopt the proposal for additional minority admits” and where “people who would recommend that Stanford reject the proposal” would fall on a 9-point scale ranging from *liberal* to *conservative*.⁴ Finally, the participants reported their own ideology by rating themselves on the same scale.

³There was a manipulation embedded in the description of the affirmative action program that proved not to be pertinent to the results reported herein. (Half of the participants read that the alumnus was to pay for an additional 100 students, whereas the other half of the participants read that the alumnus was to pay for 100 of the existing freshman class). This manipulation did not affect the results we report here, and will not be mentioned further.

⁴The wording of this question raises the possibility that respondents may have overestimated not the ideological consistency of the two sides, but simply their extremity on the focal issue of affirmative action. (That is, they may have thought that most adopters and rejecters, unlike themselves, were 1s and 2s or 8s and 9s on the 9-point scale). Although such assumptions of extremity would be a further manifestation of the phenomenon under consideration, they also could provide a somewhat different explanation for our present findings. We shall describe procedures undertaken in Study 3 to rule out this possible artifact.

Results and Discussion

Assessments of the Affirmative Action Proposal

Participants' responses to the critical question about their reaction to the proposal were recoded such that higher numbers indicate greater support. Overall, the sample favored the proposal, ($M = 6.58$, $SD = 2.09$ on the 9-point scale) with an overwhelming majority of individuals (74%) recommending adoption, whereas the remainder were either neutral (8%) or recommended rejection (18%).

Before turning to the specific predictions on the assumed versus actual political ideology of the supporters and the rejecters, it is worth noting that participants in general underestimated the amount of support for the affirmative action proposal. Overall, participants predicted that 45% ($SD = 22\%$) of their fellow students would favor adoption, that 36% ($SD = 20\%$) would favor rejection, and that 19% ($SD = 17\%$) would express neutrality. Both supporters ($M = 46\%$, $SD = 22\%$) and rejecters ($M = 37\%$, $SD = 22\%$) underestimated the relevant percentage of supporters, as the overall 45% ($SD = 22\%$) estimate was far smaller than the actual 74% figure, paired $t(74) = 6.26$, $p < .001$, effect size: $\eta^2 = .35$.⁵ The mean estimate for degree of support offered by supporters (46%) and rejecters (37%) did not differ significantly, $t(68) = 1.26$, $p = .21$, $\eta^2 = .02$.

Actual Versus Assumed Differences in Political Ideology

Our most important findings involve a comparison between the actual and assumed political ideologies of affirmative action supporters and rejecters. Participants' self-ratings on the relevant scale (where higher numbers indicated greater conservatism) indicated only small mean differences in ideology between the 58 participants favoring adoption of the affirmative action proposal ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.81$) and the 14 participants favoring rejection ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.63$), $t(70) = 1.12$, $p = .27$, $\eta^2 = .02$. This small difference in means contrasted dramatically with the expectations of our participants (see Figure 1). Overall, partisans (supporters and rejecters) predicted that supporters would be highly liberal ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.20$) and that rejecters would be highly conservative ($M = 6.71$, $SD = 1.33$)—a difference of 3.73 points on the relevant rating scale, which far exceeded the actual difference of 0.59 points, $t(70) = 4.43$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$.⁶

⁵For each test of significance, we shall report a measurement of effect size, η^2 . Cohen (1977) has suggested the following cutoff points for determining the size of the effect: $.01 = \eta^2 = .09$ is a small effect; $.09 = \eta^2 = .25$ is a medium effect; $.25 = \eta^2$ is a large effect.

⁶For all comparisons between estimated differences and actual differences, we adopted the conservative t-statistic utilized in Robinson et al. (1995). The relevant analysis treats actual mean difference as a sample statistic subject to estimation error.

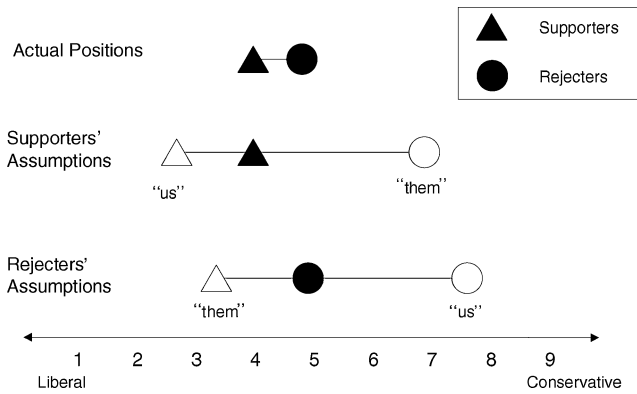


FIGURE 1 Study 1—Actual and perceived differences in liberalism/conservatism among supporters and rejecters of affirmative action.

This tendency to overestimate the link between general political ideology and position on the affirmative action proposal was shared by both groups of partisans (see Figure 1). Supporters predicted a 3.79-point gap ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.08$ vs. $M = 6.67$, $SD = 1.26$), whereas rejecters predicted a 3.50-point gap ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.60$ vs. $M = 6.86$, $SD = 1.66$) with the differences predicted by both groups being significantly greater than the actual difference (for supporters, $t(57) = 3.56$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$, for rejecters, $t(13) = 5.59$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .71$). Even the 6 participants who classified themselves as neutral agreed that the gap in question would be substantial ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.64$ vs. $M = 6.67$, $SD = 1.37$; $t(5) = 2.78$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .61$).

One potential problem with Study 1 is that participants classified themselves on a continuous basis in terms of their support for the affirmative action proposal, and the actual differences we are using as a basis of comparison were formed by taking the average of rejecters (those checking 1 to 4 on the scale) and the average of supporters (those checking from 6 to 9 on the scale). This is potentially problematic for two reasons. First, participants may have had a more extreme exemplar of a supporter and a rejecter in mind when they were making their judgments. However, when we look only at the responses of participants who classified themselves at the extreme of the two scales, we find that extreme rejecters (those who circled 1; $N = 2$) had a mean self-rating on the liberal/conservative scale of 5.00 whereas extreme supporters (those who circled 9; $N = 16$) had a mean self-rating of 2.69, a discrepancy of 2.31, which was significantly less than the 3.73 point discrepancy predicted, $t(70) = 2.03$, $p = .046$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Thus, overall, participants overestimated the discrepancy between the adopters and the rejecters even when we consider the most extreme people on either side of the debate. It does not appear, therefore, that participants had a more extreme exemplar in their minds than was actually the case.

Using a dichotomous category could also obscure relationships between the continuous variables of support for the policy and perceived difference between rejecters and supporters. It may be that support for adopting the policy (or

support for rejection) may be associated with a greater perceived gap between adopters and rejecters. A related reason why creating a discrete category from the original continuous measure is potentially problematic is that more extreme participants may perceive a greater difference between adopters and rejecters than less extreme participants. Thus, the extreme participants may be accounting for the results. To examine these issues, we conducted a regression analysis where the outcome measure was the perceived difference between adopters and rejecters. The two predictors were the participants' rating on the adopt/reject scale (testing the linear effect) and the participants' adopt/reject rating squared (testing the quadratic effect). The linear effect was not significant, $\beta = .11$, $t(76) = .97$, $p = .33$, $\eta^2 = .01$, suggesting that overall support for the policy did not moderate the effect. The quadratic effect was also nonsignificant, $\beta = .58$, $t(75) = .96$, $p = .34$, $\eta^2 = .01$, suggesting that extremity does not predict perceived differences either. Taken together, these results suggest that classifying people who indicate their support continuously into two discrete groups did not distort our results or obscure important differences in extremity. However, to address this criticism completely, participants should categorize themselves in the same manner as they evaluate others, a methodology adopted in Study 3.

Closer examination of Figure 1 reveals that students favoring rejection of the affirmative action proposal were misperceived to a greater extent by allies and opponents alike (difference between actual and perceived liberalism/conservatism of rejecters, $M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.14$) than were students favoring adoption (difference between actual and perceived liberalism/conservatism of adopters, $M = 1.13$, $SD = .78$), paired $t(77) = 9.79$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .56$. In particular, while the liberalism of the adopters was overestimated to a relatively modest degree, the conservatism of the rejecters was massively overestimated. This result is consistent with earlier findings on false polarization (e.g., Keltner & Robinson, 1997) suggesting that the majority tend to exaggerate the views of the minority more than vice versa. Indeed, our results replicate this finding, as the majority adopters exaggerated the extremity of the minority rejecters ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.99$) to a greater extent than the minority rejecters exaggerated the extremity of the majority adopters ($M = 1.25$, $SD = .97$), $t(70) = 4.52$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .23$. The consequence, as we see in this study, is that it is the people holding the minority position on a given issue whose real views are most likely to be misperceived. This misperception may be related to people's tendency to view minorities as more homogeneous than majorities (Simon & Brown, 1987; see also Tajfel, 1981).

Our theorizing about naïve realism led us to predict that opposing groups would overestimate not only the gap between their views on a given subject but also the degree to which such views reflect a consistent ideological stance. Study 1 demonstrated that people can infer general ideology from positions expressed about particular issues.

Study 2 was designed to show a further consequence of naïve realism—that is, overestimation of ideological *consistency*. In other words, Study 2 examined the extent to which participants would be willing to generalize from the knowledge of an individual's views on one issue to assumptions about that individual's views on a variety of other issues that seem to have the same ideological foundation.

Research on intergroup evaluation has found that people evaluate out-group members as more internally consistent than in-group members (Linville & Jones, 1980; Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989). This research finds that people view their in-group members as being more complex and out-group members as more simple and consistent (Linville & Jones, 1980). Study 2 extends this research by suggesting that one's evaluation of both in-group members (e.g., fellow affirmative action supporters) and out-group members (e.g., affirmative action rejecters) is likely to be driven by ideological consistency—more so than one's personal views on political issues.

The research design in Study 2 features a comparison of actual and expected views—this time, not only actual and expected political orientations, but also actual and expected views about two issues (abortion and immigration policy) that are commonly assumed to reflect more general liberal versus conservative political orientations.

STUDY 2: PERCEIVED IDEOLOGICAL CONSISTENCY

Study 2 presented the same hypothetical affirmative action proposal featured in Study 1 to a new sample of students. Participants read the proposal and then answered a series of questions about the proposal and the likely views both of students who supported it and of those who rejected it, as well as parallel questions about their own views. This time however, questions dealing with overall political ideology were supplemented with questions about their own positions and the probable positions of affirmative action supporters and rejecters with respect to two specific issues, abortion and immigration, normally assumed to reflect a consistent political ideology.

Method

Participants

A total of 53 undergraduates from Stanford University completed this study, for which they received credit in their introductory psychology course.

Procedure

The questionnaire presented to participants described the same hypothetical affirmative action proposal that had been

featured in Study 1. Again, students were asked to characterize their own views on the proposal and to estimate the views of their peers, as well as to answer a new set of questions characterizing their own views and the views of their fellow students about abortion and immigration policy.

Dependent Measures

As in Study 1, participants were asked whether the university should adopt the affirmative action proposal made by a “wealthy alumnus” who had undertaken to fund it. Once again, participants characterized their views on the 9-point scale anchored at *definitely reject* and *definitely adopt*, and were accordingly designated as supporters, rejecters, or neutrals. Participants again estimated the percentage of peers who would be supporters versus rejecters of the same proposal, estimated the mean position of the two groups on the liberal/conservative scale of ideology used in Study 1, and indicated their own position on the same scale. However, in Study 2 they also estimated where “the people who advocate that Stanford adopt the extra minority admit proposal” and where “the people who advocate that Stanford reject (it)” stand on the issue of abortion (based on a scale ranging from 1 [*prochoice*] to 9 [*prolife*]) and on the issue of tightening immigration policy (based on a scale ranging from 1 [*do not tighten*] to 9 [*tighten*]).

Results and Discussion

As in Study 1, participants' responses to the critical question about the action they favored on the part of the university were recoded such that higher numbers indicate greater support for the proposal. The overall sentiment of sample favored the proposal, ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 2.22$ on the 9-point scale) with a majority of individuals (60%) recommending adoption, whereas the remainder were either neutral (19%) or recommended rejection (21%). As in Study 1, participants underestimated the relevant level of support. Overall, participants predicted that 49% ($SD = 21%$) of their fellow students would favor adoption, that 35% ($SD = 18%$) would favor rejection, and that 16% ($SD = 14%$) would express neutrality. The overall mean estimate, as well as the separate mean estimates made by supporters of the proposal ($M = 51%$, $SD = 21%$) and rejecters ($M = 47%$, $SD = 22%$) was smaller than the actual 60% rate of support that the proposal received.

Actual Versus Assumed Political Ideology

The contrast between the actual and assumed political ideologies of affirmative action supporters and rejecters further replicated our earlier results. As in Study 1, participants' self-ratings of ideology (with higher numbers indicating greater

conservatism) revealed only a small mean difference between supporters of the proposal ($M = 4.44, SD = 2.00$) and rejecters ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.60$), $t(41) = 0.57, p = .57, \eta^2 = .01$ (see Table 1). By contrast, partisans in our study (i.e., supporters and rejecters) predicted that supporters would be highly liberal ($M = 2.86, SD = 1.13$) and that rejecters would be highly conservative ($M = 7.21, SD = 1.36$)—a difference of 4.35 points on the relevant rating scale, which far exceeded the actual difference of 0.38 points, $t(41) = 5.15, p = .001, \eta^2 = .39$.

Both groups of partisans as well as neutrals shared this tendency to overestimate the link between general political ideology and support versus rejection of the affirmative action proposal. That is, supporters predicted a 4.41-point gap (i.e., $M = 2.84, SD = 1.17$ vs. $M = 7.25, SD = 1.41$), rejecters predicted a 4.18-point gap ($M = 2.91, SD = 1.04$ vs. $M = 7.09, SD = 1.22$) and neutrals predicted a 3.87-point gap ($M = 2.80, SD = 0.63$ vs. $M = 6.67, SD = 1.25$)—each of which differed from the actual 0.38-point gap (for supporters, $t(31) = 4.97, p = .001, \eta^2 = .44$, for rejecters, $t(10) = 7.09, p = .001, \eta^2 = .83$, for neutrals, $t(9) = 5.60, p = .001, \eta^2 = .78$). Thus the prediction of a false-polarization effect was clearly confirmed, with both the partisans and nonpartisans assuming the existence of a wide ideological chasm, where little if any existed.

Actual Versus Assumed Ideological Consistency

Beyond replicating our earlier results, Study 2 focused on actual versus assumed group differences in views about two contentious issues commonly thought to reflect liberal or conservative political orientations. Once again, we found that the actual views of the two groups in our study differed only to a modest degree.

On the 9-point scale dealing with abortion views (ranging from 1 [*prochoice*] to 9 [*prolife*]), supporters and rejecters of the affirmative action proposal did not differ ($M = 3.44, SD = 2.70$ for supporters, $M = 2.36, SD = 2.42$ for rejecters), $t(41) = -1.17, p = .25, \eta^2 = .03$. Indeed, as these means indicate, rejecters of the affirmative action proposal actually proved to be somewhat (albeit nonsignificantly) *more* prochoice than rejecters of the proposal (see Table 1

and Figure 2, top). On the 9-point scale dealing with immigration policy (ranging from 1 [*do not tighten*] to 9 [*tighten*]), we did find a statistically significant difference between the two groups (see Table 1 and Figure 2, bottom). That is, supporters of the affirmative action proposal in our study were, on average, opposed to a tightening of immigration restrictions ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.83$ on the 9-point scale, where 5 indicated neutrality) whereas rejecters of the affirmative action proposal were in favor of such tightening of restrictions ($M = 5.82, SD = 2.48$), $t(41) = 2.36, p = .02, \eta^2 = .12$.

When we turn from actual discrepancies between the two groups to perceived discrepancies (see Table 1 and Figure 2),

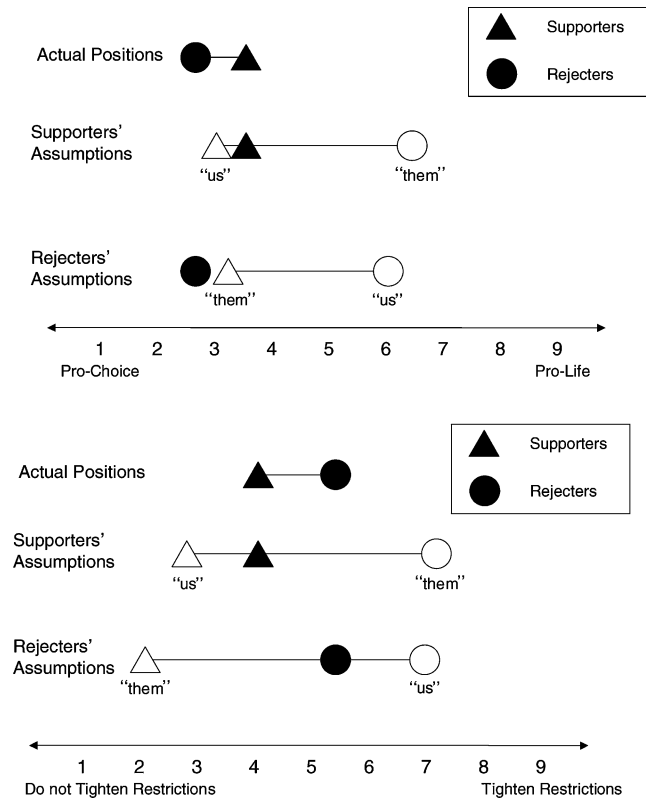


FIGURE 2 Study 2—Actual and perceived differences in attitudes toward abortion (top) and attitudes towards immigration (bottom).

TABLE 1 Actual Versus Assumed Differences in Affirmative Action Supporters' Versus Rejecters' Liberalism/Conservatism, Abortion Attitudes, and Attitudes Concerning Immigration Laws in Study 2

| | Actual Views of Supporters Versus Rejecters | | Estimates of Views by Supporters | | Estimates of Views by Rejecters | |
|---|---|-----------|----------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|-----------|
| | Supporters | Rejecters | Supporters | Rejecters | Supporters | Rejecters |
| Liberal/Conservative | 4.44 | 4.82 | 2.84 | 7.25*** | 2.91 | 7.09*** |
| Prochoice/Prolife | 3.44 | 2.36 | 3.00 | 6.19*** | 3.18 | 6.00*** |
| Do not tighten immigration laws/ Tighten immigration laws | 4.16 | 5.82* | 2.84 | 7.33** | 2.00 | 7.00** |

Note. *Difference in actual views significant, $p < .05$. **Estimate of discrepancy in views greater than actual discrepancy in views, $p < .01$. ***Estimate of discrepancy in views greater than actual discrepancy in views, $p < .001$.

it is evident that our primary prediction was strongly confirmed. In the case of attitudes about abortion laws, partisans, overall, assumed a mean difference between rejecters ($M = 6.14$, $SD = 1.30$) and supporters of the affirmative action proposal ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.38$) equivalent to +3.10 points on the 9-point scales—which contrasted dramatically with the actual difference of -1.08 points, $t(41) = 4.30$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .31$. Both supporters and rejecters of the affirmative action proposal shared this misperception. Supporters estimated a 3.19 point difference in attitudes about abortion policy ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.83$ vs. $M = 6.19$, $SD = 1.37$) and rejecters estimated a 2.82 point difference in attitudes about abortion ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.60$ vs. $M = 6.00$, $SD = 1.10$), with both estimated gaps far exceeding (and in the opposite direction from) the actual difference of -1.08 (for supporters, $t(31) = 4.45$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .39$, for rejecters, $t(10) = 3.69$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .57$).

In the case of attitudes about immigration policy, a similar although less dramatic discrepancy between expected and actual between-group differences was evident. Whereas supporters and rejecters of the affirmative action plan had actually differed by +1.66 points in their attitudes about policies calling for restrictions upon immigration, partisans overall had predicted means for these two groups of 2.62 ($SD = 1.32$) and 7.23 ($SD = 1.36$) respectively—that is, a gap equivalent to +4.61 points on the relevant 9-point scale, which constituted a highly significant overestimate of the actual gap, $t(31) = 3.25$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .25$. Supporters estimated a 4.49 point difference in attitudes about immigration policy ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.39$ vs. $M = 7.33$, $SD = 1.39$) and rejecters estimated a 5.00 point difference ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.89$ vs. $M = 7.00$, $SD = 1.34$), with both estimated gaps far exceeding the actual difference of 1.66 (for supporters, $t(31) = 3.02$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .23$, for rejecters, $t(10) = 3.76$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .59$).⁷

These results suggest that participants assumed that ideology would strongly predict views on specific issues. When participants evaluated a supporter of the affirmative action policy, they assumed that the supporter possessed a liberal political ideology and had beliefs on abortion and immigration consistent with this liberal ideology. When participants evaluated a rejecter of the affirmative action policy, they assumed that the rejecter possessed a conservative political ideology and had beliefs on abortion and immigration consistent with this conservative ideology. The fact that in actuality, supporters and rejecters of the affirmative action proposal differed little if at all on ideology and beliefs about other issues, suggests that the assumptions made by participants may have led them astray. Such assumptions, furthermore, may prompt the adversaries to stereotype each other in

⁷As in Study 1, we conducted regression analyses to determine whether degree of support of the policy or extremity would predict perceived differences on all three of our scales. For all three scales, neither degree of support nor extremity (i.e., the square of the adopt/reject rating) were significant predictors, β s ranging from $-.09$ to $.06$, *ns*.

ways that lead them to overlook possibilities for discovering common ground, and perhaps even make them less likely to desire negotiating issues of common concern. Study 3 pursued this potentially negative scenario. It also sought to demonstrate that more accurate expectations and predictions about the other side could lead to more positive sentiments about the prospects for a successful negotiation.

STUDY 3: CONSEQUENCES OF FALSE POLARIZATION FOR NEGOTIATION

Study 3 explores the consequences for negotiation of misperceiving the extremity and ideological consistency of one's political opponents. Research on negotiation has found that negotiators tend to think that the bargaining position of opponents is driven by their personality traits (Morris, Larrick, & Su, 1999). These dispositional attributions are almost certainly in error, as negotiation behavior is determined almost exclusively by a person's bargaining position and not personal dispositions (Thompson, 1990). Moreover, the tendency to make dispositional judgments about a negotiation opponent is likely to be heightened when that opponent is misperceived as having an extreme and ideological position, as partisans assumed their opponents in Study 1 and Study 2 possessed.

A related issue in negotiation that is of particular relevance in contentious issues such as the affirmative action debate is the incompatibility error (Thompson, 1995b), which is also known as the "fixed pie" perception (Bazerman & Neale, 1983; Thompson & Hastie, 1990). The incompatibility error is the perception that the other party's interests are completely opposed to one's own interests in a negotiation, when in reality, the other party's interests are completely compatible (Thompson, 1995b); that is, there is no fixed pie. As noted earlier, the debate on affirmative action is frequently cast in oppositional terms, with "two warring camps, each of which (staking) a mutually exclusive claim to moral virtue (Bobo, 1998; p. 985)." That is, the debate on affirmative action is often cast in highly partisan terms and research from the negotiation literature has found that partisans in a debate are particularly likely to see themselves as having incompatible interests (Thompson, 1995b).

In Study 1 and Study 2, partisans in the affirmative action debate saw each other as being driven by a particular conservative or liberal ideology. We propose that adversaries who feel that they will be dealing with counterparts whose views are dictated by overarching ideologies will perceive their interests as being incompatible, and hence be pessimistic about the prospects for reaching a mutually satisfactory agreement. The parties may even decline the invitation to pursue a potential dialogue, or at best come to a negotiation unwilling to search for common ground. By contrast, if the parties think that their counterparts see the complexity of issues, feel some ambivalence about the particular position they are advocating, and are free of the constraints of any

overarching ideology, then they are apt to be optimistic about the prospects for bridging the gap in their positions, and eager to begin a potential dialogue, as has been found for less partisan observers of negotiations (Thompson, 1995b). This greater optimism about negotiation has been shown to be associated with feelings of success in negotiations (Thompson, 1995a).

We sought to test this reasoning in Study 3 by having participants express their sentiments about a future negotiation with two potential counterparts—one of whom they believe holds the same, highly polarized and ideologically consistent views that they *assume* to be characteristic of individuals on the other side of the debate, and the other whom they believe holds the less polarized and ideologically consistent views that *actually* are characteristic of the individuals on the other side. In almost all other respects, the design and procedure of Study 3 were identical to those of the earlier studies, and as such, they allow replication of the principal findings of those studies. That is, participants were presented the same hypothetical affirmative action proposal as in our earlier studies, and asked to offer their own views on this proposal, to indicate their overall political ideology, and to indicate their position on abortion and immigration policy. They were also asked to estimate the ideological stance and views on abortion and immigration policy of supporters and rejecters of the affirmative action proposal.

Other than the addition of questions about potential negotiation counterparts, the only change in methodology involved the wording of the question requiring participants to designate their position on affirmative action. In the two earlier studies, participants had rated themselves on a 9-point scale that had a midpoint indicating neutral, and had been asked to rate “supporters” and “rejecters” of the proposal—without the questionnaire clearly indicating that it was referring to individuals who, respectively, had checked one of the four points to the left or one of the four points to the right of the scale. In this study, participants responded on a dichotomous scale, and subsequently, they could only assume that the questionnaire was referring to individuals who had classified themselves using the same dichotomy.

Method

Participants

A total of 58 undergraduate students, 32 from Princeton University and 26 from Stanford University were recruited for the laboratory study, for which they received credit toward an introductory psychology course requirement.

Procedure

Assessments of the proposal and political attitudes. The questionnaire presented the same hypothetical affirmative action proposal for increasing minority admission to the

university that had been utilized in our two earlier studies. After reading the description of the proposal in question, participants again responded to a series of questions about their own views and the views they expected to be characteristic of others. However, in contrast to Studies 1 and 2, where participants gave their views about what the university should do regarding the proposal using a 9-point scale, in Study 3 they merely circled either “adopt” or “reject” and were accordingly classified as *supporters* ($N = 43$) or *rejecters* ($N = 15$). They then proceeded to estimate the percentage of undergraduate students at their university who would choose each of these options, to rate the political ideology of the “people who advocate that the university adopt” and “people who advocate that the university reject” the proposal and to report their own ideology (in each case using the same 9-point liberal/conservative scale that had been employed in Study 1 and Study 2). Again the participants were asked both to estimate the mean responses of the two groups and to indicate their own views on the issues of abortion and tightening of immigration policy.

Assessments of negotiation prospects. After completing the questionnaire, participants were told by an experimenter that they would have the opportunity to take part in another session of the experiment at a later time, where they would be paired with another participant—one who “had an opposing view on the affirmative action proposal.” They were further informed that their task would be to “negotiate a mutually acceptable resolution as to what the university should adopt in regards to the proposal made by the wealthy alumnus.” In anticipation of this later session they were provided with two sealed envelopes and were told that each contained the responses of a prospective opponent to the same series of questions that they themselves had completed earlier.

At that point, participants were given envelopes containing the putative responses of their two potential negotiation opponents—one based on actual responses of members of the opposing group, the other based on the participants’ assumptions and estimates about their opponents (both of which were based on Study 2 results). These putative responses were handwritten, in ink, to create a convincing facsimile of the types of questionnaire responses that had been furnished by actual participants.

The first questionnaire response, a circling of either “Adopt the Proposal” or “Reject the Proposal” simply reinforced the message that the individual in question did in fact hold a position on the affirmative action proposal opposite to the participant’s own position. The responses indicated for the next three scales on the questionnaire constituted our independent variable manipulation. In the case of participants who supported the affirmative action proposal, one of the two “rejecter” profiles was modeled as closely as possible on the *actual* positions of rejecters, the other was modeled as closely as possible on the positions that the supporters had

assumed for such rejecters. The order of presentation (actual vs. assumed opponent) was counterbalanced. The appendix presents both the putative responses and the actual and assumed means from Study 2 upon which they were based.

After examining each profile of a potential negotiation counterpart, participants responded to several questions about the prospects for the forthcoming negotiation with that individual. Specifically, they indicated how much common ground they saw (using a 9-point scale anchored at *very little common ground* and *a great deal of common ground*) and how successful they thought the negotiation would be (using a 9-point scale anchored at *not at all successful* and *very successful*). Participants were also asked, "When you think about negotiating with this person, how does it make you feel?" and made ratings on three scales offering the affective terms *open*, *angry*, and *optimistic* (in each case using 9-point scales anchored at *not at all* and *extremely*).

When participants completed the assessments for each potential negotiation partner, the experimenter returned and debriefed them about the study. In particular, the experimenter explained that there would not be a second session, and explained the purpose behind the study.

Results and Discussion

On the dichotomous measure adopted for our third study, 74% of participants indicated that they thought their university should adopt the affirmative action proposal of the wealthy alumnus, whereas 26% of participants indicated that they thought their university should reject it.⁸ As in our earlier studies, this level of support for the proposal was greater than the level ($M = 61\%$, $SD = 21\%$) predicted by the students. In the case of Study 3, however, the "false consensus effect" (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) manifested by our participants was statistically significant, with supporters of the proposal estimating a higher rate of support on the part of other students ($M = 65\%$, $SD = 21\%$) than did rejecters ($M = 48\%$, $SD = 17\%$), $t(56) = 2.89$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .13$.

Actual Versus Perceived Differences in Ideology and Views About Specific Issues

Our attempt to replicate the false polarization effect using a simple dichotomous categorization of supporters versus rejecters was successful. Supporters of the proposal did rate themselves as more liberal ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.52$) than rejecters ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.71$), $t(56) = 3.07$, $p = .003$,

$\eta^2 = .14$. But this actual ideological divide (equivalent to 1.44 points on the relevant scale) was much smaller than participants overall estimated it would be ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.08$ vs. $M = 7.16$, $SD = 1.36$), an estimated gap equivalent to 3.97 points on the same scale, $t(56) = 4.50$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$. The supporters estimated a 3.93 point difference in liberal/conservative ideology ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.19$ vs. $M = 7.23$, $SD = 1.49$) and rejecters estimated a 4.07 point difference ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.64$ vs. $M = 6.93$, $SD = 0.88$), with both estimated gaps far exceeding the actual difference of 1.44 (for supporters, $t(42) = 4.00$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .28$, for the rejecters, $t(14) = 4.28$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .57$).

Similar false polarization results were obtained on the specific issues presented. In the case of the abortion issue, support for the prochoice position was only slightly stronger for students favoring adoption of the affirmative action proposal ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 2.48$) than for students favoring rejection ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 2.17$), $t(56) = 0.84$, $p = .40$, $\eta^2 = .01$. This gap (equivalent to 0.60 points on the relevant rating scale) is smaller than that estimated by participants in general ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.33$ vs. $M = 5.70$, $SD = 1.70$), an estimated gap of 2.05 points, $t(56) = 2.84$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .13$. Supporters estimated a 2.29 point difference on the abortion issue ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.27$ vs. $M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.70$) and rejecters estimated a 1.40 point difference ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.50$ vs. $M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.37$), although only the mean estimate of the supporters was greater than the actual gap, (for supporters, $t(42) = 2.11$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .07$, for rejecters, $t(14) = 0.86$, $p = .40$, $\eta^2 = .05$).

In the case of immigration issue, there was a statistically significant difference in the actual views of the two groups under consideration, with supporters of the affirmative action proposal proving to be less favorable to the idea of tightening immigration restrictions ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.76$) than rejecters ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.96$), $t(56) = 2.20$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .08$. However, this actual difference (equivalent to 1.20 points on the 9-point scale) was much smaller than the difference estimated by participants overall ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.10$ vs. $M = 6.79$, $SD = 1.23$), a gap of 3.60 points, $t(56) = 3.59$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$. Supporters estimated a 3.91 point difference on the immigration issue ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.05$ vs. $M = 6.95$, $SD = 1.21$) and rejecters estimated a 2.73 point difference ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.18$ vs. $M = 6.33$, $SD = 1.18$), with both estimated gaps far exceeding the actual difference of 1.20 (for supporters, $t(42) = 4.00$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .28$, for rejecters, $t(14) = 2.75$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .35$).

Assessed Prospects for Negotiation

The primary question addressed in Study 3 pertained to the assessments about the prospects of a successful negotiation with two potential adversaries—one whose purported views corresponded to the *actual* views of the typical individual on the other side of the issue regarding acceptance versus rejection of the affirmative action proposal and the

⁸Overall, Stanford students were more supportive of the policy, (85% favored adoption) than Princeton students (62% favored adoption), $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 8.11$, $p = .004$. However, there were no interaction effects involving participants' school on any of the primary dependent measures in our study, and accordingly this variable receives no further attention in our report of findings.

other whose purported views corresponded to the views the participant *assumed* would be typical of such an individual. Our findings indicate that participants felt that the prospects for success were greater with the *actual* potential adversary than the *assumed* one (see Table 2). Participants overall thought that there was more common ground with their opponent whose affirmative action views corresponded to the actual views held by opponents ($M = 4.86, SD = 1.97$) than with their opponent whose views corresponded to the views they expected from such an opponent ($M = 3.76, SD = 1.69$), paired $t(57) = 4.24, p = .001, \eta^2 = .24$. The discrepancy could be clearly seen for the assessments made by supporters of the affirmative action proposal ($M = 4.63, SD = 2.01$ vs. $M = 3.37, SD = 1.38$), paired $t(42) = 3.91, p = .001, \eta^2 = .27$, and to a lesser (and statistically nonsignificant) degree, for the paired assessments made by rejecters of the proposal ($M = 5.53, SD = 1.73$ vs. $M = 4.93, SD = 1.98$), paired $t(14) = 1.72, p = .108, \eta^2 = .17$.

The same pattern of assessments was apparent when participants were asked about prospects for reaching agreement. That is, participants overall thought the negotiation would be much more successful with the opponent whose putative affirmative action views corresponded to the actual views held by the typical opponent ($M = 5.74, SD = 1.25$) than with the opponent whose putative views corresponded to the views they assumed to be from such an opponent ($M = 4.38, SD = 1.60$), paired $t(57) = 6.20, p = .001, \eta^2 = .40$. This relationship held both for supporters ($M = 5.62, SD = 1.65$ vs. $M = 4.09, SD = 1.44$, paired $t(42) = 5.79, p = .001, \eta^2 = .44$) and for rejecters ($M = 6.00, SD = 1.25$ vs. $M = 5.20, SD = 1.78$, paired $t(14) = 2.45, p = .028, \eta^2 = .30$).

Analogous results were also obtained when participants reported their feelings about the prospective negotiation. Because the measures (optimistic, open, and angry) were highly correlated with each other ($\alpha = .70$, with angry reverse-coded), we combined the three ratings into a single measure of positive feelings towards the forthcoming negotiation. Analyses of this composite measure revealed that participants overall expressed more positive feelings about negotiating with an opponent whose putative views corre-

sponded to the actual views of such opponents ($M = 6.40, SD = 1.25$) than they did about negotiating with one whose putative views corresponded to the views they assumed would be characteristic of their opponents ($M = 5.36, SD = 1.42$), paired $t(57) = 5.00, p = .001, \eta^2 = .31$. Again this discrepancy in ratings regarding negotiation with the two prospective opponents was apparent both for participants who recommended adoption of the affirmative action proposal ($M = 6.28, SD = 1.34$ vs. $M = 5.09, SD = 1.35$), paired $t(42) = 5.31, p = .001, \eta^2 = .40$, and for participants who recommended rejection of that proposal ($M = 6.73, SD = 0.88$ vs. $M = 6.11, SD = 1.37$), paired $t(14) = 2.75, p = .016, \eta^2 = .35$.

In sum, when participants were presented with two potential negotiation opponents, they were more optimistic and saw greater common ground when the views of the opponent corresponded to the opponents' actual views than how the participant assumed the opponent to be. One potential concern, however, is that the within-participants comparison may have accentuated the contrast between the "actual" and the "assumed" opponent, inflating our results. Because we counterbalanced whether participants saw the "actual" profile or the "assumed" profile first, we examined the responses to the first profile viewed on a between-participants basis. Although this is a far less powerful design, we obtained the same basic results. Overall, participants thought the negotiation would be more successful with the actual opponent ($M = 5.64, SD = 1.77$) than the assumed opponent ($M = 4.77, SD = 1.79$), $t(56) = 1.87, p = .067, \eta^2 = .06$. In addition, participants saw more common ground with the actual opponent ($M = 4.39, SD = 2.10$) than with the assumed opponent ($M = 4.07, SD = 1.93$), albeit nonsignificantly, $t(56) = .62, \eta^2 = .01$. Finally, consistent with our within-participants analyses, participants had much more positive feelings (optimism, openness, and anger reverse scored) about the negotiation with the actual opponent ($M = 6.33, SD = 1.46$) than the assumed opponent, ($M = 5.26, SD = 1.50$), $t(56) = 2.77, p = .007, \eta^2 = .12$. Thus, the results from the between-participants analyses strongly support our contention that participants thought a negotiation would be more successful when they confronted a

TABLE 2
Expectations and Sentiments About Negotiating With Opponent Holding Actual Views Versus Opponent Holding Assumed Views in Study 3

| | Ratings by Participants Overall | | Rating by Affirmative Action Supporters | | Ratings by Affirmative Action Rejecters | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| | Opponent With Actual Views | Opponent With Assumed Views | Opponent With Actual Views | Opponent With Assumed Views | Opponent With Actual Views | Opponent With Assumed Views |
| Common ground | 4.86 | 3.76*** | 4.63 | 3.37*** | 5.53 | 4.93 |
| Predicted success | 5.74 | 4.38*** | 5.65 | 4.09*** | 6.00 | 5.20* |
| Optimism | 5.72 | 4.43*** | 5.70 | 4.26*** | 5.80 | 4.93* |
| Angry | 2.55 | 3.45*** | 2.72 | 3.77** | 2.07 | 2.54 |
| Open | 6.03 | 5.09*** | 5.88 | 4.79*** | 6.47 | 5.93* |

Note. Significance of difference in ratings for opponent with actual versus assumed views: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

potential opponent as the opponent actually is rather than as the opponent is assumed to be.

Further Observations

Study 3 replicated the basic findings of Study 1 and Study 2 using a simple and transparent dichotomous measure to classify and define affirmative action “supporters” and “rejecters”—thereby ruling out alternative interpretations that hinge on definitional misunderstandings. Note that the use of this dichotomous measure seemed to increase the gap between the two groups’ self-reports of political ideology. That is, the between-group difference in self-reports of ideology, which had not been statistically significant in the first two studies, became statistically significant in the third study (although, again, this *actual* gap in ideology was not as great as the participants *assumed* it would be).

One possibility is that the act of declaring one’s choice regarding the affirmative action proposal on the dichotomous scale induced participants to see themselves as more extreme, and perhaps even more ideological, than had been the case when they had been allowed to classify themselves on a 9-point scale (and, in most cases, to reject the extremes of that scale). Such an analysis would be consistent with self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) and would also suggest an explanation for why we observed the false consensus effect (Ross et al., 1977) in Study 3. But the particular finding also suggests that forcing people to “choose sides” rather than characterize themselves on a continuous dimension may cause people to label themselves, and subsequently present themselves to others, as more ideologically extreme and consistent than would otherwise be the case. Thus, characterizing the affirmative action issue as an “all-or-nothing debate,” wherein people must choose one side or the other, contributes both to actual political polarization and to the type of pluralistic ignorance or overestimation of ideological differences that we have documented in our three studies (see also, Van Boven, 2000).

The most important new set of findings from Study 3 demonstrated the potential impact of false polarization and erroneous assumptions about ideological consistency on the adversaries’ feelings about the prospects for a successful negotiation. When considering negotiation with an opponent who purportedly held the views that are *actually* typical of the “other side,” participants were relatively enthusiastic and optimistic. In particular, they were less likely to see their interests as incompatible with the interests of their opponent (cf. Thompson, 1995b), thought the negotiation would be more successful, and felt more open, and less angry about the negotiation process than they did when they considered the prospect of negotiating with an opponent who purportedly held the views they *assumed* to be typical of the other side. Thus, misperceptions of personality were particularly likely when participants had a view of their opponent as being ideologically extreme; however, a more accurate view of the opponents’ views led to more optimism about the negotiation.

These findings extend previous work on the implications of naïve realism for social conflict and misunderstanding by demonstrating the way in which it can pose a barrier to negotiation.

Would the greater optimism about negotiation success when presented with an “actual” opponent translate into greater *actual* negotiation success? That is, if participants had their assumptions about the opposing side refuted prior to a negotiation, would it lead to greater negotiation success? Based on research from the negotiation literature, there is reason to believe that the greater optimism of participants prior to a negotiation with an “actual” opponent would translate into more positive and successful negotiations. Prior research has demonstrated that negotiation expectations exert strong influences on negotiation outcomes. For example, Thompson (1995a) has found that aspirations exert a powerful influence on negotiation success, affecting the negotiation interactions, as well as how successful people feel with their negotiated outcomes. By extension, perceived common ground and a perception of greater openness in one’s opponent should be associated with these more positive aspirations about the negotiation, that would in turn lead to more successful negotiations.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

To borrow a question from Cook and Curtin (1987), why, in the case of people with opposing views on affirmative action, are the differences so salient and the similarities so unobtrusive? We have suggested that the tenets of naïve realism (Ross & Ward, 1996; Robinson et al., 1995) provide one answer to this question. That is, people are aware of the ambiguities and inconsistencies of their own positions. Across three studies, there was little actual ideological consistency in the positions of the participants. Being a supporter of the affirmative action proposal did not necessarily mean that a person was a liberal or supported other liberal policies such as abortion rights or looser immigration restrictions. In contrast to the inconsistent or ambivalent positions actually possessed by people, they assumed that others who do not share their position on the issue of affirmative action were driven to a greater extent by ideology or self-interest. Accordingly, they expected such individuals to hold extreme and ideologically consistent positions. Further, when these expectations were confirmed by a description of an ideologically consistent opponent in Study 3, participants saw less common ground and were less optimistic about the negotiation. However, when the similarities were made more salient by revealing the actual positions of opponents, participants saw more common ground and were more optimistic about the likelihood of success for the negotiation.

A second answer to why differences are more salient than similarities in the affirmative action debate may relate to the dynamics of social debate. The affirmative action debate on

college campuses is largely categorized as the division of a “fixed pie” of resources (Bobo, 1998); there are a limited number of admissions slots at prestigious universities, and when gains are made by one group (through either affirmative action or its elimination), other groups feel that their opportunities are limited. Consequently, each side feels that their position is incompatible with the opponents’ position. In such a situation, people may avoid revealing feelings of ambivalence lest they give comfort and ammunition to the “other side” or incur the displeasure of individuals on their own side. Further, people may believe they are publicly showing their private ambivalence, but because in reality their feelings cannot be seen, they appear more consistent and extreme than they really are (Gilovich et al., 1998; Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999). In other words, the divergence of internal feelings and external displays can create a state of pluralistic ignorance (Miller et al., 2000; Prentice & Miller, 1996), once again accentuating the differences and minimizing the commonalities that, for example, were demonstrated in our studies. Although people did differ on whether the university should adopt the affirmative action proposal, on the other measured issues of political ideology and beliefs about abortion rights and immigration, they were far more similar than different.

The potential cost of the false polarization that results from these processes was demonstrated in Study 3. The prospect of negotiating with an opponent who holds the extreme and ideologically consistent views wrongly *assumed* to be characteristic of the other side is highly disagreeable. The prospects of negotiating with an opponent who holds the more moderate and mixed views that actually characterize the other side is relatively agreeable, and the chances of finding common ground are assumed to be good.

Prescriptions for Overcoming False Polarization

What can be done to reduce false polarization and eliminate its pernicious effects on the pursuit of agreement between opposing factions? Sometimes, all that is required is an opportunity to substitute accurate information for erroneous presuppositions. Keltner and Robinson (1997) examined literature professors’ beliefs about the degree of overlap in the reading list preferences of “traditionalists” and “revisionists” and, as predicted, found that the actual amount of overlap was far greater than the two groups (but especially the traditionalists) had assumed. However, the investigators also found that *correcting* the relevant misperceptions led both to more favorable inter-group perceptions and to the pursuit of integrative solutions. Discussions designed to eliminate the type of misunderstandings and mutual misperceptions that are so often characteristic of disputes regarding affirmative action policies (Crosby, 1994)—that is, discussions in which adversaries are willing to give a public airing of their own misgivings and construct mutually agreeable compromises—thus hold some promise.

In offering this seemingly simple suggestion, it is important to realize that merely asking the two sides in a debate to express and explain their views may be ineffective or even counterproductive. Indeed, recent research dealing with the affirmative action issue (Puccio & Ross, 2000) illustrated this point by contrasting two potential techniques for reducing the false polarization bias. In the relevant studies, individuals or dyads with opposing views were instructed, in one condition, simply to reveal and explain their own position on affirmative action. Individuals or dyads in the other condition, by contrast, were instructed to offer not their own views but the arguments of the “other side” that they found most convincing.

The results of these studies were provocative. Hearing the other side explicate their *own* position did nothing to attenuate the false polarization effect. Hearing them acknowledge and explicate the arguments about affirmative action offered by the *other side* that they found at least somewhat persuasive, significantly decreased the false polarization effect, and furthermore, we believe, would have reduced the greater perceived ideological consistency observed in Study 2. In other words, partisans in the affirmative action debate gained a more accurate impression about each other’s real views when the two sides sympathetically presented each other’s arguments than when they justified their own arguments. If the results we reported for Study 3 in this article are indicative, there is reason to believe that the benefits of having partisans on both sides of the affirmative action issue display an understanding and appreciation of the other side’s arguments might be greater than a mere increase in intergroup accuracy. There is reason to believe such an increase in accuracy could also create a more cooperative and optimistic pursuit of affirmative action policies that would satisfy the concerns of supporters and opponents alike.

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APPENDIX
Actual and Assumed Positions From Study 2 and Actual and Assumed Profiles Used in Study 3

| | <i>Actual Position in Study 2</i> | <i>“Actual” Profile in Study 3</i> | <i>Assumed Position in Study 2</i> | <i>“Assumed” Profile in Study 3</i> |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Ideology-Rejecters | 4.82 | 5 | 7.25 | 7 |
| Abortion-Rejecters | 2.36 | 2 | 6.19 | 6 |
| Immigration-Rejecters | 5.82 | 6 | 7.33 | 7 |
| Ideology-Supporters | 4.44 | 4 | 2.91 | 3 |
| Abortion-Supporters | 3.44 | 3 | 3.18 | 3 |
| Immigration-Supporters | 4.16 | 4 | 2.00 | 2 |

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