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DEPOLARIZING AMERICAN MINDS: FALSE BELIEFS CAN INDUCE DEPolarIZED EXPRESSIONS ABOUT PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

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Background: American politics is becoming increasingly polarized, which biases decision-making and reduces open-minded debate.

Aims: In two experiments, we demonstrate that despite this polarization, a simple manipulation based on suggestion and false feedback can make people express and endorse less polarized views about competing political candidates.

Method: In Study 1, we approached 136 participants at the first 2016 presidential debate and on the streets of New York City. Participants completed a survey evaluating Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on various personality traits; 71% gave responses favoring a single candidate. We then covertly manipulated their surveys so that the majority of their responses became moderate instead.

Results: Participants only noticed and corrected a few of these manipulations. When asked to explain their responses, 93% accepted the manipulated responses as their own and rationalized this neutral position accordingly — even though they reported more polarized views moments earlier. In Study 2, we replicated the experiment online with a more politically diverse sample of 498 participants. Both Clinton and Trump supporters showed nearly identical rates of acceptance and rationalization of their ostensibly neutral positions.

Conclusions: These studies demonstrate how suggestion and false feedback can powerfully shape the expression of political views. More generally, our findings reveal the potential for open-minded discussion even in a fundamentally divided political climate.

Keywords: Depolarization, Choice blindness, Suggestion, Presidential candidates, Attitudes

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