Perception Gap Lesson Plan
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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.

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[1] 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.

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)

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).[2]
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),[3] 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

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[2] 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.

[3] 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.

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 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.[4]
   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[5] (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.

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[4] 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.

[5] 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.

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 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@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.[6]
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.

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

Notes and Background Information for Teachers

Prior level of knowledge expected of students: This lesson plan assumes a basic level of understanding that at this point in American history, there are two main political parties. It can be helpful but not necessary for students to already have a sense that those in the Republican Party tend to have more restrictive views of immigration than those in the Democratic Party. (See below about how to run this lesson without addressing immigration, if immigration would be too problematic for the classroom.)

Causes of the Perception Gap: A major potential cause of the Perception Gap is the information environment, driven by messages from social media, news media, and politicians. Highly perceptive students may note that social media and news media have incentives to keep the attention of their users / consumers to maximize revenues, and content that is politically polarizing often increases engagement; similarly, politicians often have electoral incentives to excite their base with divisive rhetoric.

Aggressive or threatening behaviors from partisans can increase fear and negative perceptions in the other party; this can come from everyday interactions with fellow Americans, or leaders such as politicians who sometimes find it advantageous to act more combatively than collaboratively. Some Americans can see the extreme example of behavior of politicians and wrongly assume that their voters share the same views and attitudes. Other students may note changes in society such as social stratification that can increase resentment / condescension, or increasing polarization along geographic lines that can reduce frequency of positive 1:1 interactions.

How to run this lesson without focusing on immigration: Immigration is chosen for this lesson because of the video in Step 4 of the lesson plan, which was one of the winning interventions of the Stanford Strengthening Democracy Challenge, "Correcting Division Misperceptions." If immigration is an overly problematic topic, below is a substitute option using data about democratic values and principles using data from Starts With Us (YouTube and at the end of this webpage, with the exact wording of questions found here):
  ● Background: This survey covers attitudes toward democratic values and principles. There are six in total, though accountable government, rule of law, and representative government are likely the most appropriate for this lesson. Roughly 90% of Republicans and Democrats consider the values very or extremely important, but only about a third of Republicans and Democrats think that those in the other party believe the values are very or extremely important. Note that this survey does not cover policy topics but instead attitudes toward values and principles important for a well-functioning democratic republic.

- Updated Step 2: To start the class, it is still possible to make general points about the main political parties and their typical preferences. However, note that the class will focus more on underlying democratic values and principles.
- Updated Step 3: Pick one of the democratic values and principles, such as rule of law. Regardless of which value or principle from the survey is chosen, first the term likely should be defined for the students so there is no confusion. Assuming "rule of law" is chosen (though another value or principle could be chosen instead), ask the students, "What share of people in the Republican Party and Democratic Party believe that the following value and principle is very or extremely important: the rule of law?" The rest of the step is the same, where students write their answers on their respective sticky notes (ideally red for Republican and blue for Democrat) and walk to the board up front to put them on the number line. Given this survey data, it would also be possible to have a third sticky note about Independents.
- Updated Step 4: Have students watch the 36-second YouTube video of the results. The video does not cover results for Independents, so these would have to be provided separately as seen in the full survey report. Note that unlike the immigration video, this video has not been tested for effectiveness at reducing polarization via the Strengthening Democracy Challenge, though the stark differences between perception and reality likely will surprise many students.

Research indicates that correcting the Perception Gap can be helpful, but the effects of a single lesson without any reinforcement may be short-lived: The Strengthening Democracy Challenge, run by Stanford, provides one of the strongest indications of the benefits of correcting misperceptions. The Strengthening Democracy Challenge was a crowd-sourced mega-study that tested 25 separate interventions of eight minutes or less that could be tested online. Of these 25 interventions, only three achieved all of the main targeted outcomes of reducing "anti-democratic attitudes, support for political violence, and partisan animosity." Of these three "winning" interventions, two explicitly focused on correcting misperceptions and the Perception Gap (the Correcting Division Misperceptions 3.5-minute video that is part of the lesson plan, and an interactive quiz about attitudes toward democratic norms called Correcting Democracy Misperceptions), and the other intervention arguably improved overly negative misperceptions of political leaders in the other party (a 1-minute video of two Utah gubernatorial candidates Pro-Democracy Bipartisan Elite Cues).

A separate study from More in Common unfortunately indicates that certain effects of similar interventions largely disappear after only a week. However, the study did not test for the potential benefits of repeating the message, or changing the existing information environment.[7]

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[7] A separate study of those quitting Facebook for a month found less political polarization and greater happiness, but also likely less knowledge of current events.

Therefore, it may be helpful to mention the Perception Gap numerous times over the course of a semester or year, and/or coupling this with more extensive media / social media literacy training.

Democrats and Republicans have similar extents of the Perception Gap, though certain groups do have larger Perception Gaps: The More in Common [Perception Gap](#) results show that misperceptions are quite symmetrical across the parties (i.e., Republicans' misperceptions of Democrats are similar in magnitude as Democrats' misperceptions of Republicans). However, this can vary depending on the question and topic. There are greater misperceptions among certain groups, such as those who are more politically extreme and those who shared political content on social media in the past year.

There is a potential for in-party misperceptions, but they tend to be smaller: People can misperceive those in their own party, as well. However, these misperceptions tend to be less extreme than mistaken views of those in the other party. (In other words, an average Democrat may have a Perception Gap and overestimate some stereotypical attitudes when it comes to thinking about fellow Democrats, but their Perception Gap about Republicans would usually be worse. The same is true for Republicans thinking about those in their party vs. those in the other party.) [Ahler and Sood](#) provide some examples of this in terms of demographics.

If you believe students would benefit from more theoretical discussion, the paragraph above can be generalized. There are stereotypes and misperceptions that are in-party (e.g., Democrats misperceiving about Democrats) and out-party (e.g., Democrats misperceiving about Republicans). Out-party stereotyping tends to be worse. More generally, stereotypes about any "out group" (i.e., "the other group" vs. "my group") tend to be more pronounced. People primarily stereotype out-groups, but work to correct out-group stereotypes and misperceptions can be effective.

Independents actually mostly lean toward one of the two major parties, and views held by these "leaners" of the other party are nearly as bad as those who initially identify with a major party: Data indicates that a plurality of American adults default to considering themselves Independents rather than Republicans or Democrats (e.g., in its annual average of 2022 polling, [Gallup found](#) 41% of American adults called themselves Independents, compared with 28% each calling themselves Republicans or Democrats). Yet that same polling found that only 11% of American adults do not have some preference or "lean" toward one party or another, when they are asked further about their preferences. Thus, upwards of three-quarters who call themselves Independents actually lean toward one of the two main parties. In terms of the Peception Gap, Pew Research Center in 2022 found that leaners are [nearly as negative about the other party](#) as people who fully identify with a party; the major difference is that they have much more skeptical views of the party they lean toward. (In other words, Republican leaners have only very slightly less negative views of Democratic Party than those who initially

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identify themselves as Republicans, but Republican leaners are much more skeptical of the Republican Party than those who initially identify themselves as Republicans.)

Data covered in this lesson plan is mostly about perceptions of those who identify with the other political party, but other misperceptions are possible, such as about the political leaders of those in the other party: Much of the data presented in this lesson concerns views of all people who identify with the other political party. In other words, a typical survey question asks about the share of those who identify with the other political party who hold a particular view. However, it is also possible to ask about a slightly different group of everyday Americans (e.g., perceptions of those who tend to vote for candidates of the other political party), or have questions be somewhat vague on this point (e.g., ask those who are "in" the other party, or who are generically "Republicans" or "Democrats"). Other kinds of misperceptions can concern party elites of the other party (e.g., specific leaders of the other political party).

How emotions and attitudes can exacerbate the Perception Gap: Additionally, there is a "motivated reasoning" component to the Perception Gap. Biases with underlying emotions and/or motivational biases affect how new information is perceived. Much research shows increasingly worse attitudes and emotions toward those in the other political party, on both character traits such as "closed-minded" or "immoral," and feelings such as coldness and distance from each other than they did a few decades ago. These negative attitudes and feelings affect how many people absorb information about those in the other party, as many will have a greater willingness to accept negative stories about those in the other party and fail to seek or fully believe positive stories about those in the other party.

Seeking disagreement based on actual differences, not misperceived and overestimated differences: One can 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.

Other names for the Perception Gap: If it is helpful to introduce jargon to students, one can mention that researchers have a variety of names for this phenomenon of overestimating differences between those in each political party, including "partisan misperceptions" and "false polarization."

More advanced concepts / jargon: For advanced students, additional concepts may be introduced. For instance, addressing "meta-perceptions" (what we think they think about us) is another way to reduce perceptions of polarization. There is also "outgroup homogeneity bias,"

or the tendency to think that those in a different group are more similar to each other and stereotypical than they really are.

Related Standards
ISTE

ISTE: 3b. Knowledge Constructor
3b. Knowledge Constructor
Students evaluate the accuracy, perspective, credibility and relevance of information, media, data or other resources.

ISTE: 3d. Knowledge Constructor
3d. Knowledge Constructor
Students build knowledge by actively exploring real-world issues and problems.

Center for Civic Life

Center for Civic Education: CCE.II
CCE.II
A. What is the American idea of constitutional government? B. What are the distinctive characteristics of American society? C. What is American political culture? D. What values and principles are basic to American constitutional democracy?

Alliance for Decision Education[8]

Valuing and Applying Rationality (VAR) VAR.4 Recognize, practice, and demonstrate a truth-seeking mindset: Students practice the disposition of truth-seeking rather than accepting biased narratives by critically analyzing their own beliefs and engaging in activities that prompt reflection and examination of political ideologies.

VAR.5 Practice and demonstrate self-awareness of thought processes and behavior: The lesson prompts students to reflect on their own beliefs and understandings, fostering self-awareness of their thought processes.

Recognizing and Resisting Cognitive Biases (CB) CB.1 Identify cognitive biases and heuristics and the role they play in our decision-making and our views of the world: By recognizing the influence of biases on their perceptions of political ideologies, students gain insight into the role biases play in decision-making and feeding the perception gap.

CB.5 Recognize and actively resist the tendency to be influenced by the framing of a situation

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[8] These are as analyzed by the Alliance for Decision Education. The full standards are available here.

rather than its objective details: While analyzing news articles and engaging in discussions about political perceptions, students learn to discern objective details from biased framing, thereby resisting the influence of misleading narratives.

CB.9 Recognize and actively resist the tendency to overemphasize or underemphasize information to protect already-held beliefs or self-image: The lesson prompts reflection and critical analysis while students learn to evaluate information objectively and resist the tendency to distort perceptions to align with preexisting beliefs.

Thinking Probabilistically (TP) TP.2 Measure, name, and update degrees of uncertainty related to data, facts, and predictions: The lesson encourages students to reflect on their initial perceptions of political ideologies and topics like immigration, which may involve uncertainties and incomplete information. By engaging in activities like placing sticky notes on a number line to represent their beliefs, students are prompted to measure and update their understanding of where average voters stand on political issues.

TP.6 Demonstrate persistence in improving predictions: The lesson encourages students to engage in ongoing reflection and critical analysis of their own beliefs and perceptions. By acknowledging and challenging their biases, students demonstrate persistence in improving their understanding and predictions about political ideologies and societal issues.

NCSS Curriculum Standards

NCSS Curriculum Standards: NCSS 1
NCSS 1
Learners will understand how human beings create, learn, share and adapt to culture.

NCSS Curriculum Standards: NCSS 4
NCSS 4
In order to understand individual development and identity, learners should study the influence of various times, cultures, groups and institutions.

NCSS Curriculum Standards: NCSS 5
NCSS 5
Students know how institutions are formed, maintained and changed, and understand how they influence individuals, groups and other institutions.

NCSS Curriculum Standards: Topic 4, Standard 8C
Topic 4, Standard 8C
The student understands changes in communication and their effects.

Maryland Social Studies Standards

1.0 Civics: Students shall inquire about the historical development of the fundamental concepts and processes of authority, power, and influence with particular emphasis on civic reasoning in order to become informed, responsible citizens, engage in the political process, and contribute to society.

2.0 Peoples of the Nations and World: Students shall inquire about the people of the United States and the world using a historically grounded, multidisciplinary approach in order to recognize multiple narratives and acknowledge the diversity and commonality of the human experience.

6.0 Skills and Processes: Students shall inquire about civics, geography, economics, history, and people and nations of the world using disciplinary literacy skills and processes to critically evaluate content through a variety of source materials across disciplines and use reading, writing, and other forms of communication to develop, defend, and critique arguments in order to take informed action.

Pennsylvania Civics and Government Standards

Grades 6, 7, and 8
5.3.8.H - Describe the influence of mass media on government

Grade 9
5.3.9.H - Evaluate the importance of freedom of the press and the political influence of mass media

Grade 12
- 5.2.12.B - Examine the causes of conflicts in society and evaluate techniques to address those conflicts
- 5.2.12.D - Evaluate and demonstrate what makes competent and responsible citizens
- 5.3.12.D - Evaluate the roles of political parties, interest groups, and mass media in politics and public policy
- 5.3.12.H - Evaluate the role of mass media in setting public agenda and influencing political life
- 5.3.12.J - Evaluate critical issues in various contemporary governments

Virginia History and Social Science Standards of Learning (April 2023 version)

Grade 7: Civics and Economics
CE.8 The student will apply history and social science skills to examine the political process at the local, state, and national levels of government by
b)   analyzing campaigns for elective office, with emphasis on the roles of candidates, volunteers, the media, voters, and poll watchers

CE.9 The student will apply history and social science skills to explain the role of the media and social media and the influence on local, state, and national levels of government by
b)   describing the effect biased reporting can have on public opinion
d)   evaluating the effect of social media on political campaigns, politics, and civic discourse
e)   identifying the source of information and considering possible motivations or biases of its creator

Grade 12: Virginia and United States Government
GOVT.6 The student will apply history and social science skills to explain the process of local, state, and national elections by
b)   examining campaign finance laws and campaign funding and spending, including the impact of Supreme Court decisions, the nationalization of campaign financing, and the role of interest groups
c)   describing the nomination and election process, including the organization and evolving role of political parties and interest groups
d)   analyzing the influence of media coverage, campaign advertising, public opinion polls, social media, and digital communications
e)   explaining the role of the Electoral College and the impact of reapportionment and redistricting on elections and governance
f)   evaluating challenges of the election process, including redistricting and gerrymandering