# The objectivity illusion and voter polarization in the 2016 presidential election

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Two studies conducted during the 2016 presidential campaign examined the dynamics of the objectivity illusion, the belief that the views of "my side" are objective while the views of the opposing side are the product of bias. In the first, a three-stage longitudinal study spanning the presidential debates, supporters of the two candidates exhibited a large and generally symmetrical tendency to rate supporters of the candidate they personally favored as more influenced by appropriate (i.e., "normative") considerations, and less influenced by various sources of bias than supporters of the opposing candidate. This study broke new ground by demonstrating that the degree to which partisans displayed the objectivity illusion predicted subsequent bias in their perception of debate performance and polarization in their political attitudes over time, as well as closed-mindedness and antipathy toward political adversaries. These associations, furthermore, remained significant even after controlling for baseline levels of partisanship. A second study conducted 2 d before the election showed similar perceptions of objectivity versus bias in ratings of blog authors favoring the candidate participants personally supported or opposed. These ratings were again associated with polarization and, additionally, with the willingness to characterize supporters of the opposing candidate as evil and likely to commit acts of terrorism. At a time of particular political division and distrust in America, these findings point to the exacerbating role played by the illusion of objectivity.

intergroup conflict | polarization | cognitive bias | political psychology

The tendency for humans and other species to make invidious distinctions between "us" and "them," and to behave accordingly, has long been a focus of theory and research not only for social scientists but for biologists and moral philosophers (1–3). However, humans alone include in the "us" individuals whose shared identities are based on neither blood nor affinal ties, nor even shared membership in a troop or community. People make such invidious distinctions when it comes to political and ideological allegiances (4–7). Indeed, in the American electorate today, negative attitudes about those on the other side of the political divide are more pronounced than negative attitudes based on race (8, 9). Although scholars disagree on how ideologically divided Americans are on matters of policy (10, 11), the polarization that took place during the 2016 campaign and presidency of Donald Trump continues today and has become an increasing concern.

Social scientists attribute such heightened polarization, and accompanying enmity and distrust, to numerous social, political, and economic factors, as well as changes in media (12–16). While these structural shifts undeniably play a role, the research we report in this paper explores a psychological phenomenon, the illusion of personal objectivity (17–20), that we propose exacerbates negative intergroup sentiments and polarization. Expressed in first-person terms, this illusion is the conviction that "my" particular perceptions and beliefs about the world are an objective reflection of reality (21). This conviction of course is somewhat tautological, for to believe a proposition is to think it reflects reality (22). What follows, however, is the pernicious belief that those with different views are uninformed, misinformed, or unintelligent (23–25), and

are likely to have succumbed to cognitive or motivational biases to which "I," and those who share "my" views and political allegiances, are relatively immune (26, 27).

The objectivity illusion has been documented in past studies involving attitudes about climate change, affirmative action, and welfare policy. With respect to these and other issues, people tend to believe that their own views and those of their political allies are more influenced by evidence and sound reasoning, and less influenced by self-interest and other sources of bias, than the views of their political adversaries (28–31). In the present research, we explored the nature, degree, and impact of the objectivity illusion at a specific moment in United States political history. In particular, we investigated the existence, stability, and symmetry of that illusion in the perceptions and attributions of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton supporters in the 2016 presidential election.

We also examined the extent to which the two groups of supporters denigrated each other and displayed partisan bias both in evaluating the debate performances of the two candidates and in assessing putative blog authors supporting each candidate. We additionally investigated the willingness of participants to label those on the other side of the political divide as evil and potential terrorists. Social scientists and pundits alike have devoted a great deal of attention to Trump supporters, the sources of their fears and resentments, and the steadfastness of their support (12, 32–37). Much less attention has been given to

## Significance

Political polarization increasingly threatens democratic institutions. The belief that "my side" sees the world objectively while the "other side" sees it through the lens of its biases contributes to this political polarization and accompanying animus and distrust. This conviction, known as the "objectivity illusion," was strong and persistent among Trump and Clinton supporters in the weeks before the 2016 presidential election. We show that the objectivity illusion predicts subsequent bias and polarization, including heightened partisanship over the presidential debates. A follow-up study showed that both groups impugned the objectivity of a putative blog author supporting the opposition candidate and saw supporters of that opposing candidate as evil.

the social, cognitive, and motivational processes that influence Trump's opponents. We thus undertook the present research not only to extend the literature on the objectivity illusion and outgroup animus, but also to explore the degree of symmetry, and particular asymmetries in these phenomena, across the political divide.

Beyond extending past research, we break important new ground by exploring the degree to which displays of the objectivity illusion at the outset of the study predicted subsequent biases, including participants': 1) Evaluations of candidates' debate performances, 2) strengthening of partisanship over the course of the campaign, 3) willingness to receive a book that challenged their current political stances, and 4) reluctance to see their children marry supporters of the political party of the candidate they personally opposed. We also examined how evaluations of candidates' debate performances mediated the relationship between initial displays of the objectivity illusion and subsequent partisan strengthening over time.

Two studies explored these predicted manifestations and consequences of the objectivity illusion during the month and a half prior to Election Day in the 2016 election (Fig. 1). Study 1, a longitudinal study, encompassed three stages spanning the presidential debates. In the first stage ($n = 870$), just prior to the first presidential debate, Trump supporters, Clinton supporters, and undecided voters made assessments about the normative versus nonnormative bases of the beliefs held by fellow citizens who supported each of the two candidates. The former included appropriate influences, such as *knowledge of facts and history* and *careful consideration*; the latter included *misinformation*, *self-interest*, and other potential sources of bias. The difference in these attributions comprised our measure of the objectivity illusion. To obtain a more general measure of outgroup (vs. ingroup) denigration, participants also rated the personal traits (for example, *compassion* and *patriotism*) of the two groups of partisan supporters.

The second stage ($n = 696$), conducted 1 d later, focused on assessments respondents made about the performances of the candidates in the first presidential debate. It also assessed participants' interest in a lottery book gift that was either supportive or critical of their preferred candidate. The third stage ($n = 509$), conducted 24 d later, focused on participants' assessments of the candidates' final debate performance, and also measured participants' claims that they would feel upset if their child married across partisan lines. The data we collected over the three stages allowed us to assess changes that took place over time in participants' bias and levels of support for the two candidates. We examined the moderation of such changes by the degree to which those participants had displayed the objectivity illusion in their assessments of normative versus nonnormative influences at the outset of the study.

Study 2 ($n = 1,715$) focused on the assessments participants made 2 d before the election about normative and nonnormative influences on the putative author of a blog article supportive of either Trump or Clinton, and also the personal traits of that blog author. We also assessed perceptions of others as evil and likely to commit acts of terrorism, and again measured participants' interest in a lottery book gift supportive or critical of the two candidates. Finally, we examined the association between our initial measure of the objectivity illusion and the change in strength of participants' support for their preferred candidate after reading the blog article as well as its association with other response measures in the study.

## Results

All simple effects tests were estimated with regression models that predicted outcome values for participants at one SD above and below the mean on our measure of the objectivity illusion, which we term "high" and "low," respectively, in reporting our results. See *SI Appendix* for floodlight analyses (38).

**Attributions Regarding Influences on Political Allies vs. Adversaries.** Our composite measure of the objectivity illusion in study 1 reflected the mean of three perceived normative influences minus the mean of four nonnormative influences on political allies minus political adversaries (Table 1). This measure revealed that Trump and Clinton supporters believed that the average American citizens supporting their favored candidate ("allies") based their views primarily on normative considerations (mean [$M$] = +1.24, SD = 1.94), and that the average American citizens supporting the other candidate ("adversaries") based their views primarily on nonnormative considerations or biases ($M = -3.00$, SD = 1.89), $t(744) = 37.72$, $P < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.38$. This disparity, which constituted our measure of the objectivity illusion, correlated with strength of partisanship ($r = 0.50$, $P < 0.001$). It was greatest among self-described very strong supporters ($d = 2.08$), intermediate among strong supporters ($d = 1.55$), and smallest, although not trivial, among those who merely leaned in the direction of their preferred candidate ($d = 0.99$).

As shown in Table 1, the objectivity illusion was apparent in the case of every influence that participants had rated. The relevant disparities in assessments made about influences (Fig. 2) were generally symmetric in the case of Trump and Clinton supporters who characterized themselves as leaning toward ($P = 0.841$, $d = 0.03$) and strongly supporting ($P = 0.691$, $d = 0.06$) the candidate of their choice. However, very strong Trump supporters displayed a greater disparity in their attributions ($M_{diff} = +6.43$, SD = 2.99) than very strong Clinton supporters ($M_{diff} = +5.57$, SD = 2.68), $t(161) = 2.38$, $P = 0.019$, $d = 0.31$. At each level of support, Trump supporters also exceeded Clinton supporters in their belief that an *interest in what is best for the country* influenced their allies more than their adversaries, and that *biased media coverage* had influenced their allies less than their adversaries (all $Ps < 0.033$, $ds > 0.34$).
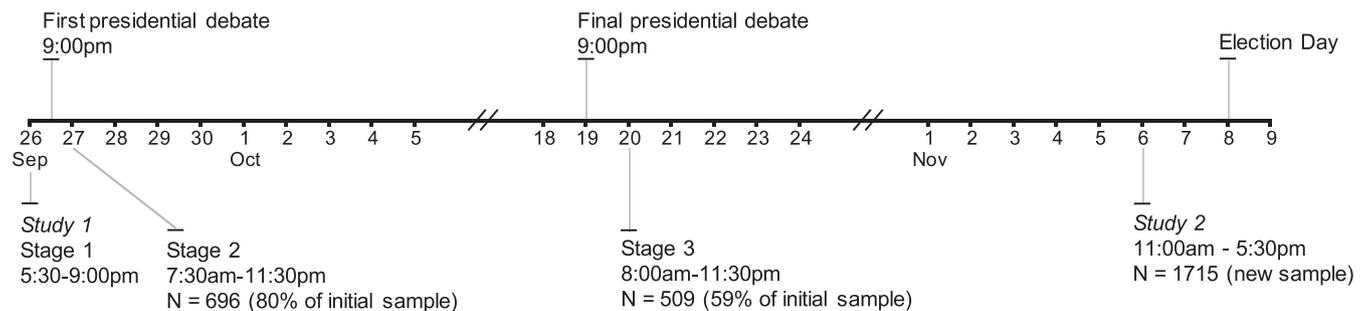
**Fig. 1.** Timeline of studies, presidential debates, and election. Times approximated in Eastern Standard Time.

**Table 1. Perceived influences on average Americans who support Trump vs. Clinton: Study 1**

| Influencing factor | Mean ratings by Trump supporters | | | | Mean ratings by Clinton supporters | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Re: Supporters of | | | | Re: Supporters of | | | |
| | Trump | Clinton | Difference | $d$ | Trump | Clinton | Difference | $d$ |
| Careful consideration | 4.64 | 2.81 | +1.83 | 0.88 | 2.37 | 4.95 | −2.58 | 1.29 |
| Interest best for country | 5.76 | 2.87 | +2.89 | 1.28 | 3.25 | 5.45 | −2.20 | 0.96 |
| Knowledge facts-history | 4.87 | 2.76 | +2.11 | 0.91 | 2.34 | 4.97 | −2.64 | 1.37 |
| Normative composite | 5.09 | 2.81 | +2.28 | 1.20 | 2.65 | 5.12 | −2.47 | 1.45 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| Biased media coverage | 3.47 | 5.83 | −2.35 | 1.00 | 5.41 | 4.04 | +1.37 | 0.69 |
| Misinformation | 3.39 | 5.78 | −2.39 | 1.10 | 5.97 | 3.56 | +2.41 | 1.11 |
| Propaganda | 3.77 | 5.64 | −1.87 | 0.79 | 5.95 | 3.71 | +2.25 | 1.10 |
| Self-interest | 4.50 | 5.40 | −0.90 | 0.45 | 5.61 | 4.39 | +1.22 | 0.61 |
| Nonnormative composite | 3.78 | 5.66 | −1.88 | 1.07 | 5.74 | 3.92 | +1.81 | 1.15 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| Overall composite | 1.31 | −2.85 | +4.16 | 1.23 | −3.09 | 1.20 | −4.29 | 1.49 |

All mean differences significant at $P < 0.001$. Participants rated targets on 7-point scale (e.g., 1 = Not at all influenced to 7 = Extremely influenced). Overall composite reflects the mean of normative influences minus the mean of nonnormative influences. The objectivity illusion was measured as the difference in the overall composite scores between allies and adversaries for each group of supporters.

For their part, undecided voters perceived both average Trump supporters ($M = −1.93$, SD = 1.85) and average Clinton supporters ($M = −1.52$, SD = 1.86) to have been influenced more by nonnormative considerations than by normative ones, $t(124) = −11.69$, $P < 0.001$, $d = 1.05$; $t(124) = −9.14$, $P < 0.001$, $d = 0.82$, respectively, although this disparity was slightly greater in their assessment of Trump supporters, $t(124) = 2.42$, $P = 0.017$, $d = 0.22$.

The objectivity illusion proved strong and largely stable. The same assessments made by participants 24 d later at stage 3 were highly correlated with their baseline assessments, $r = 0.82$, $P < 0.001$, and the disparity in ratings of political allies versus adversaries was only slightly reduced in magnitude over this time frame ($M_{diff} = +5.13$, SD = 3.72 at stage

1 vs. $M_{diff} = +4.79$, SD = 3.93 at stage 3), $t(447) = −2.16$, $P = 0.031$, $d = 0.10$.

**Ratings of Personal Traits of Political Allies vs. Adversaries.** On a separate composite of nine positive and two reverse-coded negative personal traits, both Trump and Clinton supporters, as expected, again offered more favorable ratings of their political allies ($M = 4.83$, SD = 0.89) than their political adversaries ($M = 2.90$, SD = 0.97), $t(744) = 36.48$, $P < 0.001$, $d = 1.34$. This measure, which captures denigration of the outgroup relative to the ingroup, again correlated with strength of partisanship, ($r = 0.51$, $P < 0.001$), greatest in the case of very strong supporters ($d = 1.95$), somewhat smaller in the case of strong supporters ($d = 1.54$), and least, although again large in conventional

**Study 1: Objectivity illusion**



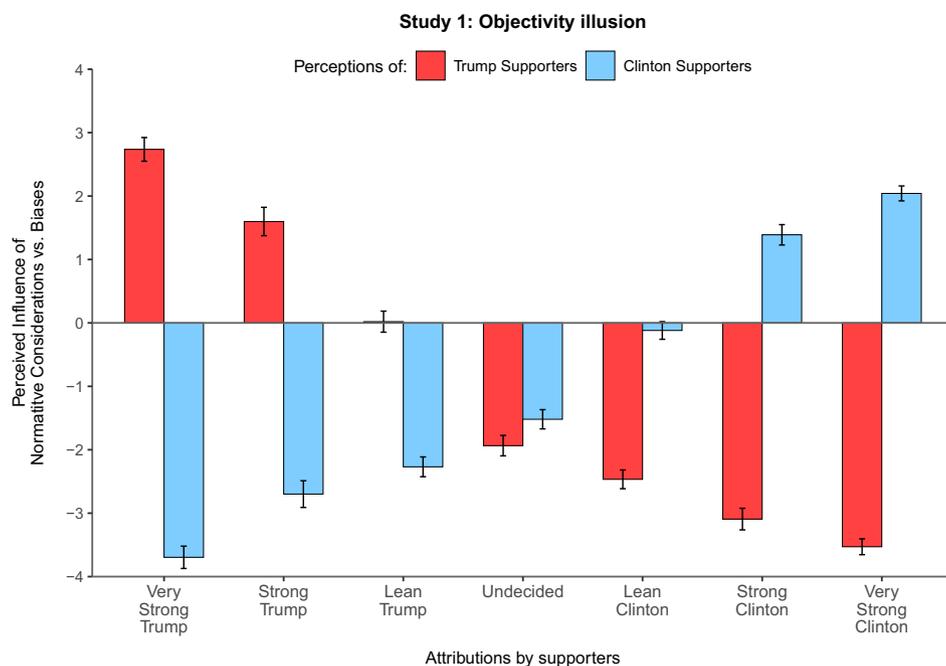**Fig. 2.** The objectivity illusion measured in study 1 by how partisans perceived their allies and adversaries (i.e., average American voters who favored Trump or Clinton) to be influenced by a composite of the mean of three normative considerations (e.g., *knowledge of facts and history*) minus the mean of four nonnormative biases (e.g., *misinformation*, *biased media coverage*). Error bars represent ±1 SE.

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statistical terms, among leaners ($d = 1.00$). Undecided voters again denigrated Trump supporters ($M = 3.31$, SD = 0.99) somewhat more than they denigrated Clinton supporters ($M = 3.59$, SD = 0.79), $t(124) = -3.58$, $P < 0.001$, $d = 0.32$.

Despite the general symmetry in ratings, we found some asymmetries in the ratings offered by the two groups of supporters (Table 2). Trump supporters most distinguished their allies and adversaries with respect to *patriotism* ($d = 1.43$), whereas Clinton supporters drew this distinction least ($d = 0.25$). In contrast, Clinton supporters distinguished their allies from their adversaries much more with respect to *compassion* ($d = 1.44$) than did Trump supporters ($d = 0.44$).

**Perceptions of Debate Performances.** Reminiscent of the central finding in Hastorf and Cantril's famous "They Saw a Game" study of motivated differences in perception (39), and other past research on biased perception (40), we found that the participants in our study displayed a partisan bias in their assessments of the 2016 presidential debates. Like most media pundits, a clear but not overwhelming majority of undecided voters (62%) thought that Clinton had won the first debate, and a slim majority of them (51%) thought she had won the second debate. Relatively few undecideds thought that Trump had won either debate (14% and 16%, respectively). The remainder, in the case of each debate, saw it as a draw. In contrast, fully 93% of Clinton supporters thought she had won the first debate, 92% thought she had won the second debate, and virtually none thought Trump had won (2% in the first debate and 1% in the second debate). Conversely, 42% of Trump supporters thought he had won the first debate, 61% thought he had won the second debate, and only a minority (33% in the first debate, 20% in the second debate) thought Clinton had won either debate.

In the case of each debate, the difference in assessment between the two groups of supporters was highly significant ($\chi^2 = 255.52$, $P < 0.001$; $\chi^2 = 257.28$, $P < 0.001$, respectively), and both groups differed from undecided voters (all $\chi^2$s > 19.84, $P$s < 0.001). From the first debate to the final one, the partisan divide in perceptions of the candidates' performance grew [$b = 0.47$, 95% CI (0.25, 0.70), $t(446) = 4.09$, $P < 0.001$, $d = 0.40$] (*SI Appendix*).

Composite ratings of the two candidates' performance on 11 specific attributes (Table 3) provided further evidence of the tendency for supporters to rate their preferred candidate's debate performances more positively ($M = 5.00$, SD = 1.09) than the performances of the other candidate ($M = 2.46$, SD = 1.14), $t(447) = 29.03$, $P < 0.001$, $d = 1.37$. Indeed, on virtually every attribute in both debates, Trump and Clinton supporters rated their candidate more positively.

**Objectivity Illusion as a Predictor of Subsequent Bias and Polarization.** Our key evidence pertained to the importance of attributions (30, 41). Our measure of the objectivity illusion specifically involved participants' beliefs about why their side versus the other side believes what it does. We distinguished these attributions from participants' denigration of their adversaries relative to their allies with respect to various traits. The strength of this objectivity illusion at the outset of the study did prove to be highly predictive of subsequent assessments. To explore the strength of these relationships further, we proceeded to test whether they held even after controlling for participants' initial strength of support for their favored candidate and their ratings of the traits of the two sets of supporters.

We first demonstrated that our measure of the objectivity illusion at stage 1 predicted the average degree to which participants claimed that their preferred candidate won the two debates [$b = 0.17$, 95% CI (0.13, 0.20), $t(446) = 9.76$, $P < 0.001$, $r = 0.42$]. While fewer than two-thirds of respondents low in objectivity illusion, on average, claimed that their candidate had won the debates (64%), nearly all participants high in objectivity illusion did so (91%). This relationship remained significant after controlling for participants' initial strength of support for their preferred candidates at stage 1 [$b = 0.11$, 95% CI (0.07, 0.15), $t(445) = 5.79$, $P < 0.001$] and even after additionally controlling for their denigration of the personal traits of their adversaries relative to their allies [$b = 0.08$, 95% CI (0.02, 0.13), $t(444) = 2.87$, $P = 0.004$] (*SI Appendix*).

The difference in information processing between respondents high and low in objectivity illusion was further evident in participants' open-ended responses to a prompt asking them about their views of the debates. When these responses were subjected to a natural language processing algorithm we created (see *SI Appendix* for details), we found that participants' tendency to express their views as matters of fact (e.g., "Trump is right"; "Clinton won by a landslide") rather than as subjective personal opinions (as evidenced by the use of qualifiers, such as "I think" or "It seems to me") was predicted by the extent to which they displayed the objectivity illusion in their ratings of influence [$b = 0.10$, 95% CI (0.04, 0.16), $t(446) = 3.47$, $P < 0.001$, $r = 0.16$]. Moreover, this relationship continued to be apparent even after we controlled for the strength of participants' initial support for their candidate and their denigration of the traits of political allies relative to adversaries [$b = 0.12$, 95% CI (0.03, 0.22),

**Table 2. Perceived traits of average Americans who support Trump and Clinton: Study 1**

| | Mean ratings by Trump supporters | | | | | Mean ratings by Clinton supporters | | | |
| | Re: Supporters of | | | | | Re: Supporters of | | | |
| Trait | Trump | Clinton | Difference | d | Trait | Trump | Clinton | Difference | d |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Patriotic | 5.80 | 2.93 | +2.87 | 1.43 | Realistic | 1.99 | 5.03 | −3.04 | 1.73 |
| Hard-working | 5.72 | 3.10 | +2.62 | 1.24 | Politically sophisticated | 2.07 | 4.88 | −2.81 | 1.67 |
| Honest | 4.96 | 2.84 | +2.12 | 1.06 | Compassionate | 2.28 | 5.10 | −2.82 | 1.44 |
| Gullible | 3.38 | 5.76 | −2.38 | 1.06 | Warm | 2.37 | 4.73 | −2.36 | 1.36 |
| Realistic | 4.85 | 2.62 | +2.24 | 0.97 | Gullible | 6.06 | 3.48 | +2.58 | 1.33 |
| Concerned about fairness | 4.99 | 3.24 | +1.75 | 0.67 | Concerned about fairness | 2.43 | 5.16 | −2.74 | 1.32 |
| Warm | 4.38 | 2.99 | +1.39 | 0.63 | Cold | 5.11 | 3.21 | +1.90 | 0.95 |
| Politically sophisticated | 4.40 | 3.12 | +1.28 | 0.57 | Honest | 3.03 | 4.53 | −1.49 | 0.84 |
| Cold | 3.57 | 4.80 | −1.24 | 0.53 | Hard-working | 4.04 | 4.92 | −0.88 | 0.51 |
| Compassionate | 4.49 | 3.50 | +1.00 | 0.44 | Idealistic | 3.60 | 4.52 | −0.92 | 0.35 |
| Idealistic | 4.62 | 3.78 | +0.84 | 0.33 | Patriotic | 4.20 | 4.78 | −0.58 | 0.25 |

All mean differences significant at $P < 0.001$. Participants rated targets on 7-point scale (e.g., 1 = Not at all to 7 = Extremely). Traits sorted in descending order by effect size (Cohen's $d$).

**Table 3. Perception of performance attributes exhibited by candidates during debates**

| Ratings offered by: | Attribute | Mean ratings of | | | Cohen's d | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Trump | Clinton | Difference | First debate | Last debate |
| Trump supporters | Trustworthy | 4.47 | 2.19 | +2.29 | 0.86 | 1.22 |
| | Honest | 4.74 | 2.59 | +2.16 | 0.77 | 1.14 |
| | Inspiring | 4.45 | 2.51 | +1.95 | 0.69 | 0.93 |
| | Likable | 4.34 | 2.59 | +1.75 | 0.57 | 0.87 |
| | Convincing | 4.61 | 3.12 | +1.50 | 0.44 | 0.78 |
| | Objective | 4.20 | 3.15 | +1.05 | 0.40 | 0.56 |
| | Reasonable | 4.43 | 3.38 | +1.05 | 0.35 | 0.51 |
| | Compassionate | 4.19 | 3.22 | +0.97 | 0.34 | 0.42 |
| | Intelligent | 4.63 | 4.00 | +0.63 | 0.19 | 0.36 |
| | Informed | 4.64 | 4.14 | +0.51 | 0.11 | 0.34 |
| | Well-spoken | 4.35 | 4.63 | −0.28 | 0.25 | 0.04 |
| Clinton supporters | Well-spoken | 2.22 | 5.98 | −3.76 | 2.02 | 2.12 |
| | Intelligent | 2.21 | 5.91 | −3.71 | 2.09 | 2.10 |
| | Reasonable | 2.01 | 5.64 | −3.64 | 2.16 | 2.04 |
| | Informed | 2.28 | 5.95 | −3.67 | 2.04 | 2.00 |
| | Convincing | 1.97 | 5.39 | −3.42 | 1.90 | 1.96 |
| | Compassionate | 1.95 | 5.17 | −3.22 | 1.56 | 1.93 |
| | Likable | 1.67 | 5.06 | −3.40 | 1.76 | 1.86 |
| | Inspiring | 1.73 | 4.70 | −2.97 | 1.41 | 1.72 |
| | Trustworthy | 1.81 | 4.77 | −2.96 | 1.63 | 1.66 |
| | Honest | 2.16 | 4.98 | −2.82 | 1.60 | 1.59 |
| | Objective | 2.20 | 4.86 | −2.66 | 1.34 | 1.40 |

Ratings averaged across first and last debates. All mean differences significant at $P < 0.001$ except for Trump supporters' first debate ratings of *intelligence* ($P < 0.010$) and *informed* (ns) and final debate ratings of *well-spoken* (ns). Participants rated Trump and Clinton for each attribute on 7-point scale (1 = Not at all to 7 = Extremely). Attributes sorted in descending order by effect size (Cohen's *d*) for the last debate.

$t(444) = 2.59$, $P = 0.010$], and was replicated in study 2 (*SI Appendix*).

Perhaps the finding of greatest theoretical significance in our study was that the strength of participants' initial display of the objectivity illusion also predicted their polarization measured by changes in the endorsement of their preferred candidate over the 24 d between the outset of study 1 to the conclusion of the final debate [$b = 0.05$, 95% CI (0.02, 0.07), $t(446) = 3.29$, $P = 0.001$,

$r = 0.15$]. Once again, this relationship persisted and in fact was somewhat strengthened after controlling for the strength of participants' initial support of the two candidates [$b = 0.11$, 95% CI (0.08, 0.14), $t(445) = 7.12$, $P < 0.001$] and denigration of the personal traits of their political adversaries relative to their allies [$b = 0.10$, 95% CI (0.06, 0.15), $t(444) = 4.88$, $P < 0.001$].

As illustrated in Fig. 3, participants relatively high on the objectivity illusion tended to strengthen their endorsement of
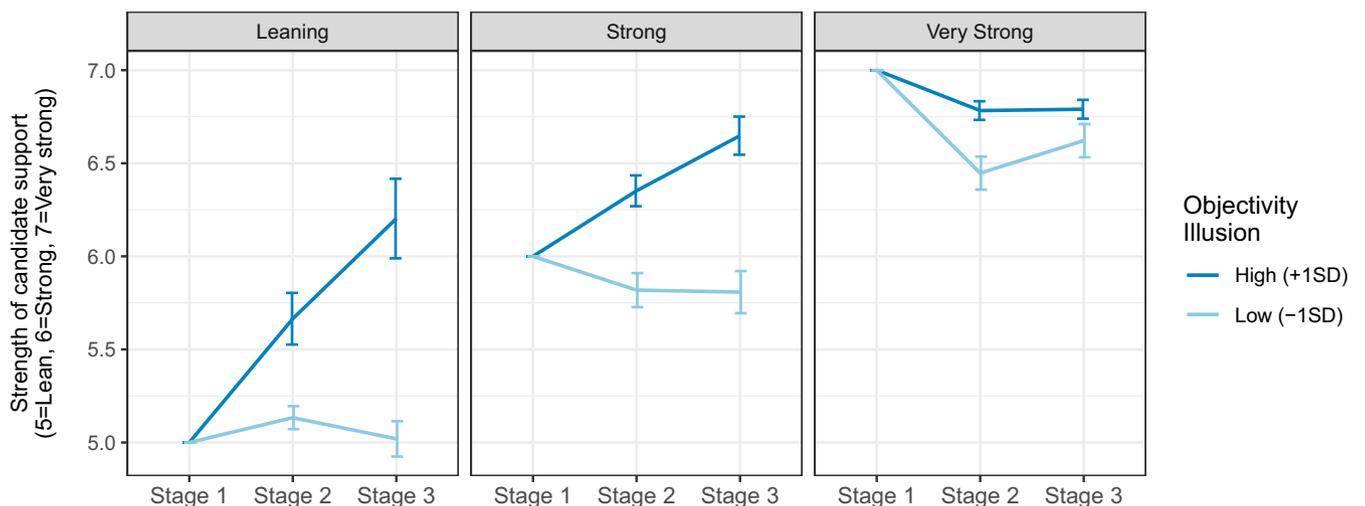


**Fig. 3.** Change in respondents' support for their preferred candidate in study 1 from the day of the first presidential debate at stage 1, to 1 d after the first debate at stage 2, to the day after the final debate 23 d later at stage 3 for participants estimated to be high (+1 SD above the mean) and low (−1 SD below the mean) in baseline levels of the objectivity illusion, measured as the degree of perceived influence of normative considerations versus biases of political allies minus adversaries. Relationships shown separately for participants at stage 1 to be leaning, strongly, or very strongly pro-Trump or pro-Clinton. Values are raw means. Error bars represent ±1 SE.
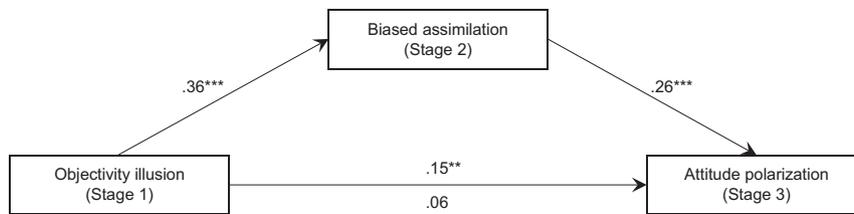
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**Fig. 4.** Mediation analysis in study 1: The relationship of the objectivity illusion at stage 1 to attitude polarization (i.e., the increase in respondents' support for their preferred candidate from stage 1 to stage 3), as mediated by biased assimilation in the degree to which partisans perceived their candidate to win the first debate at stage 2. The value below the arrow from objectivity illusion to attitude polarization is after controlling for the mediator. All coefficients are standardized. **$P < 0.010$, ***$P < 0.001$.

their initially preferred candidate over the 24-d period [$b = 0.17$, 95% CI (0.05, 0.29), $t(446) = 2.80$, $P = 0.005$]. In contrast, participants relatively low on that measure showed a marginal decrease in their level of support for their initial preferred candidate [$b = -0.11$, 95% CI ($-0.23$, 0.01), $t(446) = -1.85$, $P = 0.065$], a tendency that proved significant in study 2 (*SI Appendix*).

Logistic regression confirmed these effects along categorical changes in partisan allegiance [$b = -0.45$, 95% CI ($-0.62$, $-0.30$), $z = -5.45$, $P < 0.001$, odds ratio (OR) = 0.64]. Whereas participants high on the measure of objectivity illusion showed only a 1.1% likelihood of changing their allegiance or becoming undecided, participants low on the measure showed a 15.4% likelihood of doing so. These relationships again persisted after controlling for initial strength of support and trait ratings, all $P$s < 0.039 (*SI Appendix*), and were apparent in participants' voting intentions (*SI Appendix*).

Baseline objectivity illusion further predicted two other later responses. First, it predicted participants' reluctance to receive a free book in a lottery at stage 2 that was favorable to the opposing candidate rather than to their preferred one [$b = -0.21$, 95% CI ($-0.28$, $-0.14$), $z = -6.20$, $P < 0.001$, OR = 0.81]. The likelihood of selecting a book favoring the opposing candidate over their preferred one was 15.9% for those high on the scale compared to 40.2% for participants low on the scale. Second,

objectivity illusion predicted the extent to which participants indicated at stage 3 that they would feel upset if their son or daughter married someone who strongly identified with the political party of the opposing candidate [$b = 0.13$, 95% CI (0.09, 0.16), $t(446) = 7.33$, $P < 0.001$, $r = 0.33$]. Again, both of these relationships remained statistically significant after controlling for initial strength of candidate support [$b = -0.16$, 95% CI ($-0.24$, $-0.09$), $z = 4.29$, $P < 0.001$, OR = 0.85; $b = 0.12$, 95% CI (0.08, 0.16), $t(445) = 5.80$, $P < 0.001$] and denigration of the personal traits of political adversaries relative to allies [$b = -0.14$, 95% CI ($-0.25$, $-0.04$), $z = 2.82$, $P = 0.005$, OR = 0.87; $b = 0.07$, 95% CI (0.01, 0.13), $t(444) = 2.46$, $P = 0.014$].

**Modeling Polarization.** Consistent with previous accounts of attitude polarization (20), the relationship between our initial measure of the objectivity illusion and later changes in strength of candidate support was statistically mediated by our measure of bias in the assimilation of whatever new information was provided by the debates. That is, participants initially displaying relatively high levels of this illusion were the ones most inclined to later view the candidates' debate performances in accordance with their prior beliefs; and the extent to which they did so predicted the degree to which their support of their preferred candidate increased over time. As shown in Fig. 4, there was a significant indirect effect of baseline objectivity illusion at stage 1
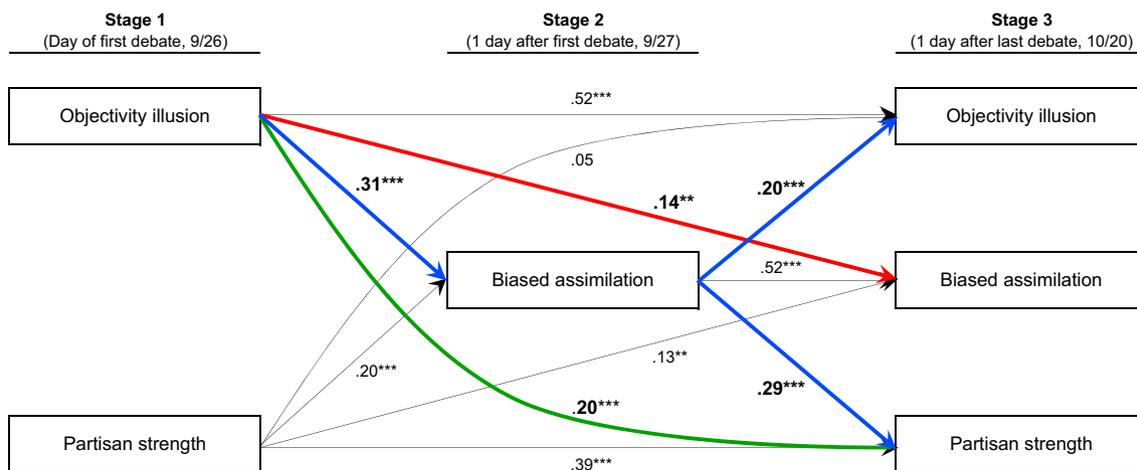
**Fig. 5.** Path model showing how objectivity illusion may result in heightened polarization over time. Partisan strength measured by the degree of participants' support for their preferred candidate. Biased assimilation measured by the degree to which participants perceived their preferred candidate to win each debate. Objectivity illusion measured as the degree to which participants' allies minus adversaries were influenced by normative minus nonnormative influences on the subset of influences measured at both stages (*knowledge of facts and history*, *misinformation*). Coefficients are standardized estimates. For illustrative purposes, the most theoretically relevant paths are colored and described in the text. The model was fully saturated. The following estimated parameters are not shown: Means and intercepts, variances and error variances, and within-stage covariances. **$P < 0.010$, ***$P < 0.001$.

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on strengthening of support for the participants' favored candidate by stage 3, statistically mediated by assessments of who won the first debate on the relevant 7-point scale at stage 2 [$b = 0.03$, 95% CI (0.02, 0.04), $P < 0.001$] (*SI Appendix*).

The longitudinal nature of our data prompted us to use path analysis to further explore the dynamics of polarization through time. This model (Fig. 5) suggests a cascade of self-perpetuating confirmation biases. As shown in blue (Fig. 5), participants higher in displays of objectivity illusion at stage 1 were more likely to assert that their candidate won the first debate at stage 2, and this biased perception in turn predicted an increase both in their partisanship and in their certainty that their side was objective at stage 3, controlling for prior levels of these two variables at stage 1. Compounding this process was the tendency, shown in red (Fig. 5), for participants higher in objectivity illusion to escalate in the extent of this biased assimilation at the last debate relative to the first one (stage 3 controlling for stage 2). Consistent with past research (20), we also find a similar set of pathways linking higher baseline partisanship to subsequent biases. A final path, in green (Fig. 5), indicates that even controlling for these mediational pathways, participants higher in objectivity illusion tended to strengthen in their partisanship over time due to other unknown pathways (see *SI Appendix* for further details).

The correlational nature of these data precludes causal claims or clear differentiation of the various paths, but they illuminate potential pathways to polarization. On the whole, people high in objectivity illusion (or partisanship) appear to process incoming information in light of their beliefs and to then integrate that processed information in a way that further bolsters their beliefs and increases their bias. In this process, they come to believe that their side is even more objective relative to the "other side" than before, with the cycle potentially repeating in a recursive process of polarization.

**Perceptions of Political Bloggers.** Study 2 participants made assessments not about hypothetical supporters of the two presidential candidates but about the author of a fictitious five-paragraph partisan blog article favoring Clinton or Trump (see *SI Appendix* for materials). Our concern was whether the same discrepancy we had documented regarding perceived influences on allies versus adversaries in general would be apparent in attributions regarding the authors of a specific set of arguments. The study featured a between-subjects design wherein, 2 d before the election, a new group of online participants were randomly assigned to read either a blog post favoring Clinton or a blog post favoring Trump.

We attempted to make the arguments in both posts symmetrical in extremity and comparable in quality. As we had hoped, participants who characterized themselves as undecided generally rated the blogger supporting Trump and the blogger supporting Clinton similarly in terms of the strength of the blogger's candidate support ($M = 6.26$, SD $= 0.97$; $M = 6.33$, SD $= 0.93$), $t(190) = -0.53$, $P = 0.59$, $d = 0.08$, the degree to which the blog author was influenced by normative versus nonnormative considerations ($M = +0.24$, SD $= 2.41$; $M = -0.08$, SD $= 2.38$), $t(190) = 0.92$, $P = 0.36$, $d = 0.13$, and the degree to which the author's position was agreeable to them ($M = 3.55$, SD $= 1.56$; $M = 3.61$, SD $= 1.61$), $t(190) = -0.27$, $P = 0.78$, $d = 0.04$.

For Trump and Clinton supporters, however, ratings of normative versus nonnormative influences on the blog author were much more positive (i.e., normative) when the blog post supported the candidate the participants preferred ($M = +2.66$, SD $= 2.03$) than when the blogger supported the candidate they opposed ($M = -1.57$, SD $= 2.23$), $t(1513) = 38.69$, $P < 0.001$, $d = 1.98$ (Fig. 6 and Table 4). As in study 1, the size of this disparity correlated with the strength of participants' support ($r = 0.30$, $P < 0.001$). The disparity was greater among very strong supporters of the two candidates ($d = 2.77$) than among strong supporters ($d = 2.11$), and weakest—although still large in absolute terms–among leaners ($d = 1.19$). Ratings of the blog author's personal traits (Table 5) revealed the same telling asymmetries between Trump and Clinton supporters found in study 1. Once again, Trump supporters showed a much greater disparity than Clinton supporters in ratings of *patriotism*, whereas
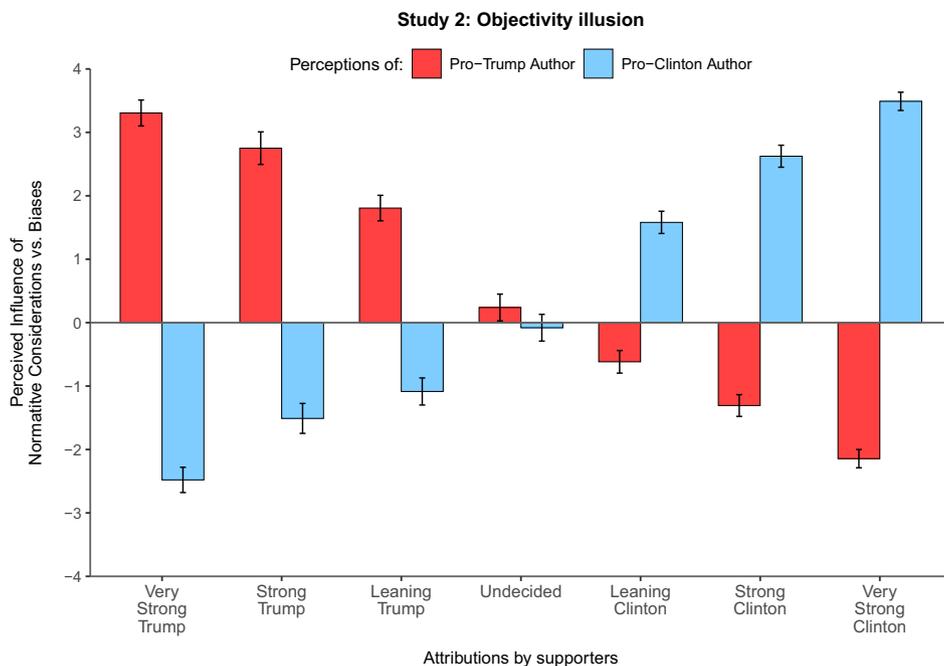


**Fig. 6.** The objectivity illusion measured in study 2 by how partisans perceived a pro-Trump or pro-Clinton blog author to be influenced by a composite of the mean of three normative considerations (e.g., *knowledge of facts and history*) minus the mean of four nonnormative biases (e.g., *misinformation*, *biased media coverage*). Error bars represent ±1 SE.

**Table 4. Perceived influences on blog author favoring Trump vs. Clinton: Study 2**

| | Mean ratings by Trump supporters | | | | Mean ratings by Clinton supporters | | | |
| | Re: Author favoring | | | | Re: Author favoring | | | |
| Influencing factor | Trump | Clinton | Difference | d | Trump | Clinton | Difference | d |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Careful consideration | 5.31 | 3.33 | +1.97 | 1.21 | 3.26 | 5.39 | −2.13 | 1.40 |
| Interest best for country | 5.81 | 3.73 | +2.08 | 1.26 | 3.92 | 5.90 | −1.98 | 1.31 |
| Knowledge facts-history | 5.03 | 3.05 | +1.98 | 1.28 | 2.87 | 5.08 | −2.21 | 1.45 |
| Normative composite | 5.38 | 3.37 | +2.01 | 1.45 | 3.35 | 5.46 | −2.10 | 1.66 |
| Biased media coverage | 2.74 | 5.51 | −2.76 | 1.63 | 4.63 | 2.76 | +1.87 | 1.10 |
| Misinformation | 2.12 | 4.91 | −2.79 | 1.70 | 4.92 | 2.01 | +2.91 | 1.86 |
| Propaganda | 2.57 | 5.30 | −2.73 | 1.67 | 5.08 | 2.69 | +2.39 | 1.47 |
| Self-interest | 3.73 | 4.75 | −1.02 | 0.58 | 4.65 | 3.59 | +1.06 | 0.62 |
| Nonnormative composite | 2.79 | 5.11 | −2.32 | 1.85 | 4.82 | 2.76 | +2.06 | 1.68 |
| Overall Composite | 2.59 | −1.74 | +4.34 | 1.99 | −1.47 | 2.69 | −4.16 | 1.97 |

All mean differences significant at $P < 0.001$. Participants rated targets on 7-point scale (e.g., 1 = Not at all influenced to 7 = Extremely influenced). Overall composite reflects the mean of normative influences minus the mean of nonnormative influences. The objectivity illusion was measured as the overall composite scores for the blog author supporting the preferred candidate, reverse-coded for the opposing blog author.

Clinton supporters showed a much greater disparity in ratings of *compassion*.

A new measure included in study 2 revealed a small but nontrivial percentage of both Clinton supporters (8.8%) and Trump supporters (9.3%) willing to characterize the blog author who supported the opposing candidate as either "very" or "extremely" evil. More striking was the percentage of Clinton supporters (13.4%) and Trump supporters (17.5%) who characterized the average Americans who favored the opposing candidate as very or extremely evil and as very or extremely likely to commit acts of terrorism leading to the death of innocent people (16.2% and 15.0%, respectively).

Consistent with study 1, the degree to which participants rated the blog author supporting their preferred candidate as more influenced by normative than nonnormative factors (reverse-coded for participants assessing the opposing blogger) predicted the extent to which participants strengthened in their support for their favored candidate after reading the blog article [$b = 0.04$, 95% CI (0.02, 0.05), $t(1525) = 6.02$, $P < 0.001$, $r = 0.15$] (*SI Appendix*). The same measure additionally predicted the degree to which participants rated the opposing blog author as evil ($r = 0.34$, $P < 0.001$), their political adversaries as evil ($r = 0.20$, $P < 0.001$), and as likely to

commit an act of terrorism ($r = 0.20$, $P < 0.001$). It also predicted their reluctance to receive a free book favoring the opponent rather than their preferred candidate [$b = −0.14$, 95% CI (−0.19, −0.09), $z = −5.41$, $P < 0.001$, OR = 0.87].

Moreover, each of these relationships remained statistically significant after controlling for participants' initial strength of support for their favored candidate (all $P$s < 0.001). The relationship of objectivity illusion to participants' perceptions of evil and the potential for terrorism on both sides and their book choice became nonsignificant when further controlling for ratings of the blogger's personal traits (*SI Appendix*). However, the objectivity illusion continued to predict how much participants' support for their preferred candidate polarized after reading the blog article [$b = 0.02$, 95% CI (0.01, 0.04), $t(1,523) = 3.01$, $P = 0.003$].

## Discussion

The research reported in this article explored the belief that those who share our political allegiances are more rational, evidence-based, and attentive to appropriate long-term considerations, and less swayed by self-interest, false information, and other distorting influences than those with contrary allegiances.

**Table 5. Perceived traits of blog author favoring Trump vs. Clinton: Study 2**

| | Mean ratings by Trump supporters | | | | | Mean ratings by Clinton supporters | | | |
| | | Re: Author favoring | | | | | Re: Author favoring | | |
| Trait | Trump | Clinton | Difference | d | Trait | Trump | Clinton | Difference | d |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gullible | 2.60 | 5.32 | −2.72 | 1.96 | Realistic | 2.83 | 5.33 | −2.49 | 1.86 |
| Realistic | 5.36 | 3.09 | +2.27 | 1.66 | Gullible | 5.21 | 2.70 | +2.50 | 1.80 |
| Patriotic | 5.74 | 3.72 | +2.02 | 1.56 | Compassionate | 3.19 | 5.13 | −1.94 | 1.58 |
| Loves our country | 5.77 | 3.99 | +1.78 | 1.45 | Concerned about fairness | 3.47 | 5.47 | −2.00 | 1.39 |
| Concerned about fairness | 5.39 | 3.62 | +1.77 | 1.23 | Politically sophisticated | 2.92 | 4.79 | −1.87 | 1.39 |
| Hard-working | 5.23 | 3.77 | +1.46 | 1.18 | Warm | 3.15 | 4.75 | −1.59 | 1.28 |
| Politically sophisticated | 4.87 | 3.27 | +1.60 | 1.13 | Cold | 3.82 | 2.26 | +1.56 | 1.18 |
| Warm | 4.69 | 3.48 | +1.20 | 0.96 | Hard-working | 4.07 | 5.09 | −1.01 | 0.92 |
| Compassionate | 4.92 | 3.66 | +1.26 | 0.95 | Loves our country | 4.51 | 5.48 | −0.97 | 0.88 |
| Cold | 2.39 | 3.66 | −1.27 | 0.93 | Patriotic | 4.50 | 5.34 | −0.84 | 0.68 |
| Idealistic | 4.78 | 4.44 | +0.34 | 0.24 | Idealistic | 4.41 | 4.68 | −0.27 | 0.20 |

All mean differences significant at $P < 0.001$ except for Trump supporters' and Clinton supporters' ratings of *idealistic* ($P > 0.010$). Participants rated targets on 7-point scale (e.g., 1 = Not at all to 7 = Extremely). Traits sorted in descending order by effect size (Cohen's $d$).

We use the term "objectivity illusion" to describe this tendency. We do so not because the assessments made about such influences by our two sets of raters are necessarily wrong, or even equally wrong. The "illusion" is that one's own views, in marked contrast to the views of the opposite camp, are free of the influence of the particular lenses, biases, and preconceptions that one brings to the task. Of course, in the case of many disagreements, one party may hold views that are better supported by facts and logical arguments than the views of the other party. But, regardless of their accuracy, beliefs are never an "unmediated" and direct reflection of "reality."

Our focus in the present research was the assessments Americans made about their political adversaries and allies in the context of the contentious 2016 US presidential election. The starting point for this research, however, is the more general phenomenon of naïve realism (22, 42) and its consequences for interpersonal assessments. The belief that one personally sees the world—not only physical objects but also issues and events—in an accurate, essentially unmediated fashion, logically entails the conviction that those who share one's perceptions and beliefs are seeing the world objectively and that those who see the world differently are seeing it in an incorrect or distorted fashion.

In our current political climate, we need little in the way of survey research to convince us that Trump supporters and Trump opponents have negative views of each other. However, our findings expand and add nuance to our appreciation of that enmity. First, we have documented a version of "us vs. them" thinking that pertains not to the traits that political partisans see in each other but to the attributions they make about why they believe what they do. Essentially, our partisan participants believed that their allies and, in study 2, a blog author endorsing their preferred candidate, based their views on valid arguments and legitimate concerns, whereas the views of their adversaries, and those of a blog author endorsing the candidate participants oppose, based their views on the distorting and malignant influence of misinformation, invalid arguments, narrow self-interest, and other dubious considerations.

Our findings, moreover, generally showed symmetry in the responses of Trump and Clinton supporters. The invidious distinctions on our composite measures were for the most part similar in magnitude for the two groups. Although the groups differed in terms of which items produced the greatest disparities in ratings of adversaries versus allies, on virtually no item did either group make an assessment of their own candidate or his or her supporters that was less favorable than their assessment of the candidate they opposed. However, two consistent asymmetries did present themselves, both of which speak to the specifics of the ongoing divide in the United States electorate. Trump supporters were especially inclined to denigrate the *patriotism* of their adversaries relative to their allies, while Clinton supporters were especially inclined to denigrate their *compassion*.

Both groups of supporters would likely be chagrined by some of the findings. In particular, we suspect that Trump supporters would be outraged by the fact that Clinton supporters rated their fellow Clintonites as more, not less, *patriotic* than Trump supporters. Similarly, Clinton supporters would shake their heads at the finding that Trump supporters rated their fellow Trump supporters as more rather than less *compassionate* than Clinton supporters (Table 2). Both sides would further be dismayed, we suspect, to discover that 12 to 18% of supporters, and up to 30% of very strong supporters, on the other side regard them as 1) very or extremely evil and 2) very or extremely likely to commit acts of terrorism.

Our additional findings are likewise a mix of results consistent with prior theory and research and results that extend our understanding of the consequences of the objectivity illusion. As expected, participants' political stance had a major impact on their perceptions of which candidate "won" the presidential debates and their assessments of the strengths displayed by the two candidates in the debates. Both groups may additionally be frustrated to learn that this partisan divide grew rather than lessened between the first and final debates, as the two candidates provided increasing evidence of their merits and deficiencies.

While current accounts of polarization in our body politic emphasize tribalism and group identification (43, 44), our findings suggest an additional source of polarization: The conviction that one's own political group or "tribe" is more in touch with reality or "truth" than the other "tribe." This conviction, fueled by the increased partisanship of media and selective exposure (45), we believe, helps account not only for increased polarization but also for the increase in enmity and distrust that researchers have documented (4–9, 24). Participants' views about the normative versus nonnormative status of the determinants of support for the two candidates, a measure of the objectivity illusion, predicted subsequent ratings of the debate performances of the candidates, outgroup animus, closed-mindedness and, most notably, a widening gulf in attitudes between the two sides over time. Indeed, our measure of objectivity illusion in study 1 proved to be a better predictor of such polarization than both the initial strength of their support for their preferred candidate and their tendency to denigrate the traits of the other side relative to their own, and in multiple regression it emerged as the only significant positive predictor.

Most notably, our findings speak to how and when attitude polarization occurs (46). When people see their own and their group's beliefs as objective reflections of reality, they tend not only to interpret subsequent information in a biased manner but to use their biased interpretations to reinforce the very belief that gave rise to the bias. As a consequence, moreover, they may come to feel even more confident in their attitudes, and more convinced in their objectivity, in a potentially repeating recursive cycle. This downward spiral of bias and polarization was captured in our mediational and path analysis models of their relationship to the objectivity illusion, and it may help to explain both growing polarization and the tendency for political attitudes to strengthen through middle age (47, 48). Our study breaks ground in providing evidence of the power of the objectivity illusion in predicting political polarization through time.

Some limitations in our studies should be noted, most importantly our reliance on a convenience sample of Mechanical Turk respondents. Although we had an ample number of participants from across the political spectrum and our sample encompassed a broad range of ethnic, demographic, and social-class groups, examination of the demographics of our sample reveals it to be somewhat more homogeneous than the United States population (*SI Appendix*). Issue might also be taken with the wording of some of the questionnaire items that deviated from that used in more standard political surveys.

Another limitation is that because assessments of partisan influences and traits correlated highly ($r > 0.75$), both may reflect a general halo effect that leads supporters of each candidate to endorse virtually any positive statement about their favored candidate and his or her supporters and virtually any negative statement about the opposing candidate and his or her supporters. However, participants' initial ratings of perceived influences in study 1 predicted their later assessments of debate performances, outgroup animus, closed-mindedness, and attitude polarization even after controlling for the strength of participants' support for the candidates and their denigration of the personal traits of political adversaries relative to allies. The measure of objectivity illusion also predicted strengthening in partisanship in our longitudinal study, whereas in multiple regression the trait ratings of allies' and adversaries' did not.

We recognize that participants' assessments of the debates and changes in their views over the course of the campaign may have

been influenced by the input of pundits and peers. Indeed, an important target for future research is the role of social dynamics, including social and mainstream media, that can increase or decrease polarization over time. While our study focused on a particularly divisive election, our theoretical account applies to the political divides that today seem to be deepening all over the globe. It is not simply tribalism that deepens divides but the belief that "my tribe is more objective than yours," a belief captured in the prescient wisdom of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin (49):

> Few things have done more harm than the belief on the part of individuals or groups (or tribes or states or nations or churches) that he or she or they are in sole possession of the truth, especially about how to live, what to be and do—and that those who differ from them are not merely mistaken, but wicked or mad: and need restraining or suppressing. It is terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right, have a magical eye which sees the truth, and that others cannot be right if they disagree.

## Materials and Methods

**Participants.** All participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). All had gained approval for ≥ 96% of previous work on MTurk, and had verified accounts in the United States. Repeat participation was prevented. Informed consent was obtained from all participants at the start of each survey, with the studies' procedures approved by the Institutional Review Board of Stanford University. In the first stage of study 1, a total of 870 participants (M age = 38.05 y, SD = 12.39; 60% female; 74% White; 32% pro-Trump, 54% pro-Clinton, and 14% undecided) completed the baseline survey (median duration = 9.40 min) in exchange for $0.70. Trump and Clinton supporters predictably differed along numerous demographic variables (*SI Appendix*). The study was marketed under the title, "Psychological Survey (10 minute)" with the following description, "Study about thoughts, perception, memory, and attitudes. 10 minutes, $0.70."

In the second stage of study 1, conducted 1 d later, 80% of our initial sample (n = 696; M age = 38.44 y, SD = 12.35; 61% female; 75% White; 92% likely voters; 31% pro-Trump, 56% pro-Clinton, and 12% undecided) completed a follow-up survey (median duration = 8.38 min) in exchange for $1.00. In the third stage of study 1, conducted 23 d later, 59% of our initial sample and 73% of our stage 2 subsample (n = 509; M age = 39.01, SD = 12.28; 61% female; 75% White; 32% pro-Trump, 56% pro-Clinton, and 12% undecided) completed a final follow-up survey (median duration = 8.07 min) in exchange for $1.00. All longitudinal analyses across study 1 considered data only for participants who completed the stage 3 follow-up survey. A total of 33 participants (3.8%) failed attention checks across study 1. Excluding data from these participants would modestly strengthen some of our reported findings. However, we included their data to simplify our reporting of results.

In study 2, a total of 1,719 participants (M age = 37.25, SD = 11.81; 59% female; 75% White; 87% likely voters; 32% pro-Trump, 57% pro-Clinton, 11% undecided) completed an online survey (median duration = 11.50 min) in exchange for $1.00. The study was described to participants with the same wording (except for payment amount) as in study 1. A total of 41 participants (2.4%) failed attention checks in study 2. Again, although excluding data from those participants would slightly increase some effect sizes, we included their data to simplify our reporting of results.

**Procedures.** Study 1 was conducted over a 24-d period that spanned the three presidential debates (Fig. 1). The first stage took place on the day of the first presidential debate, concluding just before the start of that debate. Participants were informed at the start that the study involved watching the presidential debate that night as well as completing a follow-up survey the next day. Participants were asked if they could commit "to fully watching the debate and completing the second survey." Those unwilling to make that commitment were not allowed to continue with the survey. Those completing the survey were asked to recommit to watch the debate and participate in the next stage of the study. The second stage of study 1 took place the following day after the first debate. Almost all participants (99.6%) reported that they watched most, almost all, or the entirety of the debate. The third stage of study 1 took place 23 d later, the day after the

final debate. Again, almost all participants (98.6%) reported that they watched most, almost all, or the entirety of the debate.

Study 1 included an experimental manipulation that we do not discuss in the present report, but the effects of which we shall present in detail in a forthcoming paper. In brief, this involved a framing manipulation whereby response alternatives and a blog post supporting the candidate whom the participant opposed were presented in terms of statements of fact (e.g., "The average Trump/Clinton supporter is biased") versus statements of subjective opinion (e.g., "I think the average Trump/Clinton supporter is biased"). In our forthcoming paper we shall focus on the effects of this manipulation on our various response measures. Virtually all findings presented in the present report were apparent in both conditions. To simplify and shorten our paper here, the analyses we report are collapsed across the two framing conditions.

Study 2 took place 2 d before Election Day with a new sample of participants. At the start of the study participants were asked to commit to "fully reading the blog article" they would be presented with, and only those willing to make that commitment were allowed to participate further. The between-subjects manipulation in study 2 resulted in half of the participants, regardless of their preferred candidate, reading a pro-Trump blog post and half reading a pro-Clinton blog post. In both conditions the putative author of the blog post was "Robert Miles" and the blog post bore the heading "Why I support [Donald Trump]/[Hillary Clinton]" (see *SI Appendix* for blog posts). We had endeavored to make the two blog posts, both fictitious, equivalent in the length, complexity, and quality of arguments presented.

**Measures.**

***Strength of partisanship.*** Participants' support for Trump vs. Clinton was measured in each stage of study 1 with the following query and 7-point rating scale: "Where do you stand on Hillary Clinton vs. Donald Trump?" (1 = Very strongly Hillary Clinton, 2 = Strongly Hillary Clinton, 3 = Leaning Hillary Clinton, 4 = Undecided, 5 = Leaning Donald Trump, 6 = Strongly Donald Trump, 7 = Very strongly Donald Trump). Our measure of strength of partisanship was the degree to which participants supported their preferred candidate. The order of Trump and Clinton in the question and response options was randomized. The same measure was presented at both the outset and the conclusion of study 2 (see *SI Appendix* for description of additional counterbalancing).

***Perceived normative vs. nonnormative influences (measure of objectivity illusion).*** In the first stage of study 1, participants rated the extent to which they believed average American supporters of Trump and Clinton had been influenced (1 = Not at all influenced, 7 = Extremely influenced) by three normatively appropriate considerations (*careful consideration, knowledge of facts and history, the best interests of the country*) (α = 0.82, α = 0.86, respectively) and four nonnormative considerations or biases (*biased media coverage, misinformation, propaganda, self-interest*) (α = 0.82, α = 0.82, respectively). An "objectivity illusion" composite was created by subtracting the mean of the four nonnormative influences from the mean of the three normative influences for political allies and adversaries and subtracting the latter from the former. An eighth influence (*party affiliation*), which was neither clearly normative nor nonnormative, was also measured but was dropped from the relevant composite prior to primary analyses (*SI Appendix*). In the second stage of study 1, participants rated the extent to which they thought supporters of the candidates were influenced by only *knowledge of facts and history*. In the third stage the influences included *knowledge of facts and history* and *misinformation* (all α's > 0.70).

In study 2, participants rated the extent to which they thought an allied or opposing blog author, manipulated between-subjects, was influenced by the same normative (α = 0.87) and nonnormative (α = 0.83) considerations that participants had rated in the first stage of study 1. The objectivity illusion measure in study 2 was created by reverse-coding the composite scores given to the opposing blog author. For both studies, objectivity illusion analyses included only supporters of either Trump or Clinton, as the responses of undecided respondents could not be categorized on the basis of attributions for "one's own side" vs. "the other side."

***Trait ratings.*** Participants' perceptions of the personal traits of the average American voter supporting each of the two candidates were also assessed in the first stage of study 1 with respect to 11 traits, using a 7-point rating scale anchored at 1 = Not at all, 7 = Extremely. A personal traits composite was calculated reflecting the mean of the nine positive items (*compassionate, concerned about fairness, hard-working, honest, idealistic, patriotic, politically sophisticated, realistic, warm*) and the mean of two reverse-coding negative items (*gullible, cold*) (α = 0.93, α = 0.92, respectively). In the second and third stages of study 1, participants rated average Americans

supporting the two candidates with respect to only two personal traits (*political sophistication* and *concern about fairness*) (all α's > 0.67). In study 2, participants rated the blog author with respect to 11 personal traits, with *loves our country* added and *honest* omitted from the list rated by study 1 participants (α = 0.92).

**Debate performances (measure of biased assimilation).** In the second and third stages of study 1, after the first and final debates, respectively, participants rated Trump's and Clinton's performance with respect to 11 attributes: For example, "How *convincing* was Hillary Clinton in the debate?" (1 = Not at all convincing, 7 = Extremely convincing). A performance composite was calculated by taking the mean of the 11 items (*compassionate, convincing, honest, informed, inspiring, intelligent, likable, objective, reasonable, trustworthy,* and *well-spoken*) (all α's > 0.95). They then completed a separate single-item assessment of who they thought overall won the debate, and by what margin, (1 = Hillary won by a great deal, 2 = Hillary won by a lot, 3 = Hillary won by a moderate amount, 4 = Maybe, it was a tie, 5 = Donald won by a moderate amount, 6 = Donald won by a lot, 7 = Donald won by a great deal). Biased assimilation was evidenced by the link between this assessment and the rater's partisanship, and was measured as the degree to which participants claimed their preferred candidate won the debate. The order in which the candidates were listed in both of these measures was randomized.

**Book choice.** In the second stage of study 1 and at the end of study 2 participants were asked to select one book among six options that they would like to receive if their name was selected in a lottery. Three of the books had titles indicating that they were supportive of Donald Trump or critical of Hillary Clinton, and three had titles indicating that they were supportive of Hillary Clinton or critical of Donald Trump (*SI Appendix*).

**Attitudes toward potential marital partners for offspring.** Drawing from past work on political affective polarization (4), participants in the third stage of study 1 indicated how they would feel if a son or daughter of theirs married someone who strongly identified with the Democratic party and how they would feel if that individual were strongly identified with the Republican party (1 = Not at all upset, 5 = Extremely upset). The order of the specified party identifications was randomized.

**Evilness and terrorist inclinations.** In study 2, participants rated how evil they considered the blog author (1 = Not at all evil, 5 = Extremely evil), how evil they considered supporters of each of the two candidates (1 = Not at all evil, 7 = Extremely evil), and how likely those supporters would be to commit an act of terrorism that would lead to the death of innocent people (1 = Not at all likely, 7 = Extremely likely). Two other more extreme items (e.g., how likely the author would be to endorse the use of nuclear weapons against ISIS) were also included (see *SI Appendix* for analyses on these two other items).

**Open-response questions.** At the end of the second and third stages of study 1, participants were asked, "In a few sentences, please express your views on the debate" and they wrote a median of 45 and 48 words, respectively. In study 2, participants were asked, "In a few sentences, please express your views on the candidates," and they wrote a median of 42 words. Responses were coded with natural language processing for the presence of subjective qualifiers and assertions of fact (*SI Appendix*).

**Manipulation checks.** After reading the blog articles, participants rated the extent to which they thought the blogger's position was in favor of Trump or Clinton (1 = Robert is extremely pro Trump, 7 = Robert is extremely pro Clinton) and the extent to which they agreed with the blogger's views on the candidates (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

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