

Seeing Red (and Blue): Effects of Electoral College Depictions on Political Group Perception

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Colored maps depicting electoral results may exacerbate perceptions of polarization, rather than merely reflecting them. Participants viewed maps of state-by-state Presidential election results that were either Electoral (red/Republican or blue/Democrat) or Proportional (purples that proportionally reflected each group's support). Half of the maps also displayed state-level numeric electoral results. Participants viewing Electoral maps perceived the nation as more politically divided, stereotyped the political beliefs of residents of various states more, and saw people holding views in the political minority as less agentic and less likely to vote. These differences occurred even in the presence of numeric data. Implications of these findings for intergroup perception in several domains are discussed, including the impact of electoral depictions on political campaigns and elections.

"The biggest lie perpetrated on the American public in the last thirty years has been that we're irrevocably divided between Red and Blue."

-former senator Bill Bradley

Since the 2000 elections, when the late Tim Russert (and subsequently David Letterman) popularized the use of "red" and "blue" to denote states voting for George W. Bush and Al Gore, this terminology has become entrenched in

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discourse about American political groups. Political campaigns and elections increasingly focus on the Red–Blue divide. Many argue that Americans are divided on fundamental issues into two nearly homogenous groups (Bacon, 2006), with the differences between red and blue Americas becoming increasingly intractable (e.g., Hill, 2005). Although we acknowledge the existence of this divide, we suggest that these chromatic group representations do more than passively describe the current state of affairs. We argue that the divide may, in part, arise as a consequence of the way that Electoral College decisions are depicted. Greater understanding of the role of such depictions on political perceptions will provide insight into the context in which the 2008 campaigns and historic election took place.

Effects of Red–Blue Labeling

American political attitudes span a broad spectrum of viewpoints, with a great deal of variance within every state. Although median political attitudes differ between states, each state is variable enough that any two states' distributions of political attitudes overlap considerably. Attitudes in most states are, on average, fairly moderate; for example, in 2008 (in which Barack Obama won the presidency by the largest popular vote margin ever recorded by a nonincumbent), the winning candidate in 35 of the 50 states won 60% or less of the popular vote. Moreover, the states are distributed continuously across the range of political attitudes (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2004; Glaeser & Ward, 2006), with a smooth gradient between relatively conservative and relatively liberal states.

The electoral votes that decide presidential elections, however, are allocated in winner-take-all fashion; with two exceptions (Nebraska and Maine), the candidate receiving a plurality of votes in each state is awarded all of that state's electoral votes. The Electoral College and Red–Blue electoral map, then, forcibly categorize states' political attitudes in binary fashion. Imposing a discrete structure on this gradient introduces measurement error and reduces sensitivity (Nunnally, 1978). Perceptually, the Red–Blue depiction implies little overlap in the distributions of their residents' attitudes. Even the smallest margin of victory appears as if it were a unanimous decision; it displays a 51% Republican—49% Democrat result as 100% red and 0% blue. Moreover, perceivers place disproportionate attention on the outcome of a group decision when evaluating group members' attitudes (Allison & Messick, 1985). That is, perceivers likely attend more to that dichotomous outcome than to the actual proportion of voters supporting each candidate, overestimating the winning candidate's support. Although classifying states as monotonically red or blue accurately reflects the allocation of Electoral College votes, such a depiction greatly exaggerates the extent of the divide in American political beliefs.

The social identity literature (e.g., Tajfel, 1959) has shown that this kind of classification can influence the perception of groups and their members.

Categorization sharpens the differences between members of different categories and blurs the differences between members of the same category (e.g., Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963). Binary categorization, then, likely causes red and blue states to be seen as more different from each other than they actually are, and red states to be seen as more similar to other red states (and blue states to other blue states) than they actually are. This may simultaneously produce interchromatic polarization and intrachromatic homogenization.

Interchromatic Polarization

The exaggeration of differences between red states and blue states could have important consequences. As shown in Tajfel and Turner's (e.g., 1986) minimal groups studies, even trivial intergroup distinctions can spark the biases associated with ingroup/outgroup cognition. Thus, the perceived polarization caused by the Red–Blue depiction could lead to *actual* polarization, leading to bias and conflict. Moreover, as the basis of distinguishing between groups becomes more salient and more important, these intergroup processes are engaged more intensely (Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glas, 1992). Sharper group divisions promote ingroup bias, outgroup discrimination, and intergroup conflict (Gaertner, Mann, Dovidio, Murrell, & Pomare, 1990; Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992). If the degree of dividedness between opposing groups is exaggerated, these phenomena become more likely.

Democrats and Republicans must sometimes cooperate to advance national interests in addition to competing for votes; conflict between them can make for inefficient government. Compromise is a hallmark of democracy (e.g., Moaz & Russett, 1992; Mousseau, 1998), and the consequences of failing to find common ground are often lamented: partisan politics and legislative deadlock, often accompanied by considerable rancor. To the extent that differences are more salient than their membership in a common ingroup, groups will dislike one another more (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Validic, 1998) and work together less effectively (e.g., Cunningham, 2005). Thus, by emphasizing intergroup distinctions, Red–Blue labels may promote the processes that cause intergroup polarization and conflict.

In addition to its sharpness, the *scope*—the number and variety of relevant dimensions—of the Red–Blue distinction has consequences for intergroup perception. Although the red and blue labels were initially based on a unidimensional political distinction, they have taken on broader meaning in popular discourse. The labels now also signify differences in cultural background, religious beliefs, and fundamental core attitudes (e.g., Farhi, 2004; Marlantes, 2004) and, indeed, political attitudes correlate more strongly with cultural and religious beliefs than they have in the past (Glaeser & Ward, 2006). Even though red and blue labels have come to connote a deeper, broader meaning, Red–Blue maps are typically used in media portrayals to display simple electoral choice. Yet, in so doing, they

may imply dividedness across multiple, and important, additional dimensions. Seyle and Newman (2006) suggest that this oversimplification may give rise to the perception that the various distinctions subsumed by Red and Blue are linked by some underlying commonality. This implies a fundamental or *essential* sameness, a quality often accompanied by prejudice and stereotyping (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000). A conflict between Republicans and Democrats concerns a difference in political opinion and does not explicitly span other domains; a conflict between Red and Blue, on the other hand, implies a deeper, more fundamental divide. Thus, through the facilitation of links between political, cultural, and religious divisions, the Red–Blue distinction might inspire particularly acrimonious conflict across a wide expanse of topical domains.

Intrachromatic Homogenization

In addition to interchromatic polarization, the Red–Blue depiction exaggerates the homogeneity that exists among both red states and blue states. In the 2008 election, there was considerable variance among red states in how “red” they are, ranging from Wyoming’s 64.8% Republican to Missouri’s 49.4%. Blue states are similarly variable, ranging from Hawaii’s 71.6% Democrat to Wisconsin’s 49.7%. This variability is ignored in Red–Blue depictions. Moreover, as observed by Seyle and Newman (2006), different states may vote the way they do for different reasons. Equating, for example, the political views of Washington with those of New Jersey (as the Red–Blue map does) ignores considerable regional and cultural differences between the states.

Depicting states identically and monochromatically also masks the variance that exists within states. All states are also depicted as less moderate than they are, polarizing them toward one or the other extreme. Thus, Red–Blue depictions could cause the citizens of moderate red states to be perceived as more conservative and those of moderate blue states to be perceived as more liberal. Outgroups are already perceived as more homogeneous than they actually are (Judd & Park, 1988); Red–Blue depictions likely further increase the entitativity and perceived homogeneity of Red and Blue Americas, which in turn promote stereotyping (Ip, Chiu, & Wan, 2006) and discrimination against outgroup members (Vanbeselaere, 1991).

In addition to these intergroup consequences, the masking of intrastate variance may influence participation in the political process. To the extent that they perceive homogeneity, people who hold the majority view are likely overconfident of victory, while people in the minority see little chance of electoral success. Both of these distortions are likely to reduce voter turnout if people believe their votes are unnecessary or futile (Krueger & Acevedo, 2008). Indeed, voter turnout is higher in battleground states, in which the winner of an election is not clear beforehand and the anticipated margin of victory is small (Cox & Munger, 1989).

This is in keeping with the assumptions of rational choice models of voter behavior. People who believe that their vote is unlikely to impact the outcome of an election are unlikely to vote (Bendor, Diermeyer, & Ting, 2003; Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). Thus, if people perceive a state as politically homogenous, they are likely to perceive that the state's residents have less political agency—and by extension, are less likely to vote. Red–Blue maps, by depicting states as homogenous, could promote this perception.

Objective of the Current Research

Although the potential consequences of the Red–Blue distinction and its depictions have been well-articulated from a theoretical standpoint (e.g., Seyle & Newman, 2006), we are aware of no empirical evidence to date that demonstrates the potential consequences of this framing. To test the idea that Red–Blue terminology may drive perceived polarization, rather than merely reflecting it, we conducted an experimental study examining the causal impact of exposure to Red–Blue political maps. We examined perceptions of national polarization in general and on specific issues, the perception of political attitudes, and the perceived political agency and anticipated participation of voters in the minority within their state.

Method

Participants

One hundred fifty (87 female and 63 male) introductory psychology students participated in the study in partial satisfaction of a course requirement. Subjects ranged in age from 17 to 23 years ($M = 18.9$), and included 60 self-identified Democrats, 27 Republicans, 8 members of other political parties (e.g., Green Party), 22 participants who explicitly identified with no political party, and 33 participants who declined to state a political affiliation. Three participants indicated that they were not from the United States, and they were excluded from analyses. The study took place in 2007, before the 2008 election cycle.

Stimulus Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of four maps representing two crossed conditions (electoral vs. proportional, and data vs. no data). For the first factor, participants viewed a map of the United States that was colored in one of two ways. In one version, the Electoral map, each state was shaded either bright red or bright blue, depending on whether the state was won by George W. Bush (red) or John Kerry (blue) in the previous (2004) presidential election. In the other version, the Proportional map, each state was shaded an intermediate color

between bright red and bright blue. The specific colors were generated by mixing bright red and bright blue in proportions matching the proportion of voters who supported Bush and Kerry in the 2004 election. For example, 44.6% of voters in Illinois supported Bush, while 54.8% supported Kerry; in the Proportional map, Illinois was a bluish purple color that was 44.6% red and 54.8% blue. For the second factor, half of the maps also displayed the percentage of voters in each state who supported Bush and Kerry; half of the maps only labeled the states and did not display this information. Thus, each participant received one of four maps: (1) electoral, data absent, (2) proportional, data absent, (3) electoral, data present, or (4) proportional, data present (see Figure 1).

Procedure

Participants were informed that the experiment concerned their perceptions of political attitudes in different parts of the country. They were also told that, because people's levels of political knowledge vary, they would be provided with a map of the United States displaying each state's election results from 2004. Participants were instructed to refer to the map in advance and/or while they completed the packet containing the experimental materials. Participants then completed the packet at their own pace.

First, participants answered two general questions about the extent to which the nation is politically divided: "In your opinion, how politically divided is the country?" (1 = not at all divided, 9 = very divided) and "In your opinion, is there potential for agreement or compromises on political issues in the U.S.?" (1 = very little potential for agreement, 9 = great potential for agreement.) Participants then evaluated the difference between Democrats' and Republicans' beliefs on a variety of specific issues. They did this by making two marks on a line that represented the issue, labeling one mark "D" and the other "R"; greater distances between the marks denoted greater differences between the parties' beliefs. Before completing these measures, participants viewed sample items (e.g., "music preferences") that had already been completed to ensure that they understood the meaning of different responses. Participants then evaluated six actual issues (gun control, environmental protection legislation, flag burning, minimum wage increases, gay marriage, and the Iraq war) as well as two filler issues ("federal constructionism" and "economic compliance reform"). The filler issues were designed to be realistic-sounding, but nonexistent, political issues, and were included to ensure responses were actual beliefs about political polarization rather than general beliefs or mere demand characteristics.

Next, participants rated the political attitudes of a typical citizen of several states on a 1–9 Likert-type scale (anchors: liberal-conservative). Participants rated the attitudes of residents of four states (Massachusetts, Wisconsin, New Mexico, and Alabama) selected for their political and geographical diversity. Last,

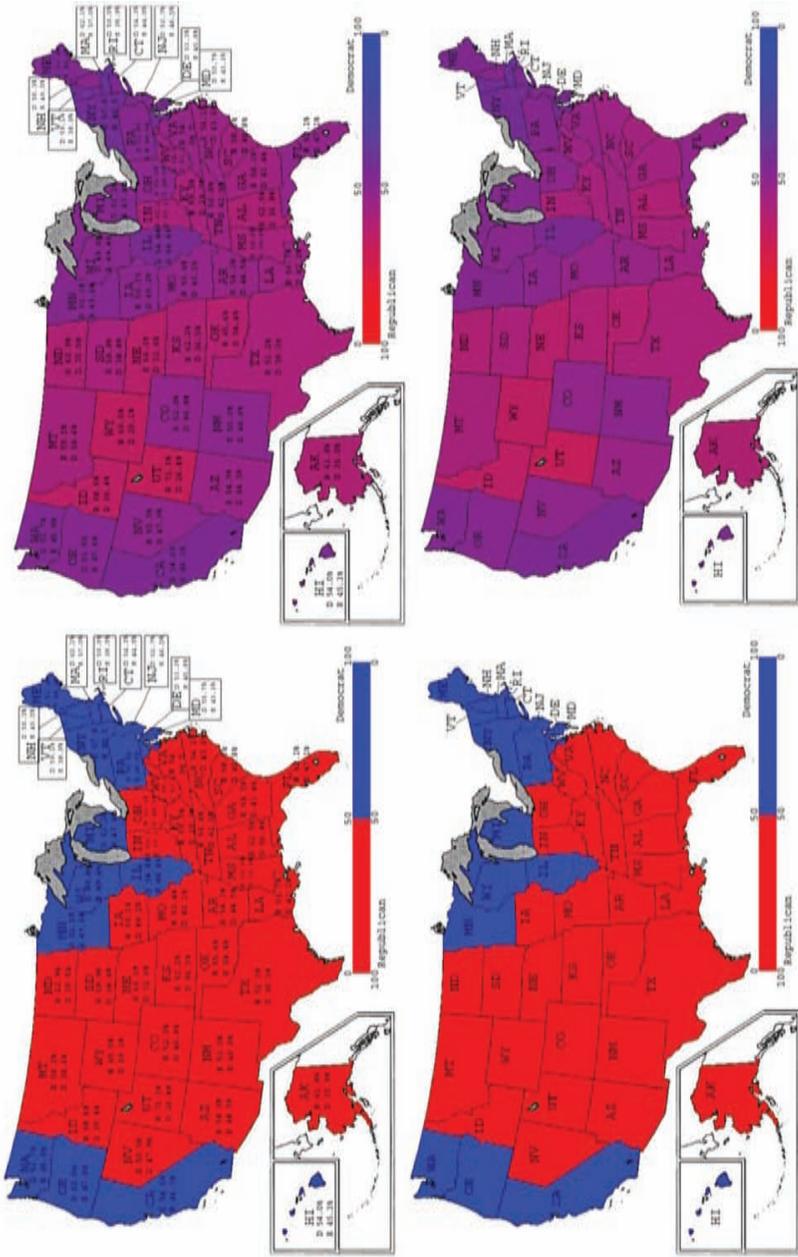


Fig. 1. Map conditions.

participants considered six hypothetical people from the minority party in their state: Republicans in Michigan, Illinois, and California, and Democrats in Nevada, Arkansas, and Texas. For each target person, participants estimated the likelihood that each person's vote would influence the outcome of the next presidential election and the likelihood that the person would vote in that election (1 = not at all likely, 9 = very likely).

After completing the questionnaires, participants were probed for suspicion. Specifically, they were asked to guess the purpose of the experiment and the experimenters' hypotheses, asked if anything in the experiment was suspicious, and directly asked if the map they saw was suspicious. No participants identified the study's specific hypotheses or general purpose, except one person who believed that the study "was meant to examine how polarized we think the country is." In addition, no participants expressed suspicion about the study as a whole or the maps themselves. Thus, the cover story appears to have been successful in masking the experimental nature and hypotheses of the study. After completing this, participants were thanked, debriefed, and dismissed.

Results

Analytic strategy. Measures of general perceived dividedness (comprising political dividedness and potential for compromise), perceived dividedness on specific real issues, perceived dividedness on filler issues, political attitude ratings, perceived minority party influence, and perceived minority party participation were computed based on a priori classifications. These six composites were analyzed using 2 (Map Color) \times 2 (Numeric Data Presence) analyses of variance. We anticipated a main effect of Map Color on all composite items, with the exception of perceived dividedness on filler issues. We had no specific predictions for the effect of Numeric Data Presence beyond our expectation that the presence of accurate numeric data might reduce the magnitude of, but not eliminate, the effect of Map Color. In addition to these analyses, we hypothesized that the effect of Map Color on perceived minority party participation would be mediated by perceived minority party agency.

Dividedness ratings. As noted, the political dividedness item and potential for compromise item (reverse scored) were averaged to create a general "dividedness" item. There was a main effect of Map Color on perceptions of dividedness. As predicted, participants who viewed the Proportional map rated the nation as less divided than did participants who saw the Electoral map ($F(1,146) = 5.01, p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$). There was also a main effect of Numeric Data Presence on perceptions of dividedness: participants who viewed maps with numeric data rated the nation as less divided than did participants who viewed maps without numeric data ($F(1,146) = 5.60, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .04$). There was, however, no significant

Table 1. Perceptions of American Political Attitudes as a Function of Map Condition

Dependent measure	Data present				
	Electoral map	Yes		No	
		Electoral map	Proportional map	Electoral map	Proportional map
Perceived dividedness	<i>M</i>	10.4	9.4	11.3	10.4
	<i>SD</i>	2.3	2.8	1.9	2.7
Democrat-Republican differences (real issues)	<i>M</i>	32.0	28.7	32.1	28.3
	<i>SD</i>	7.2	5.9	7.9	9.2
Democrat-Republican differences (filler issues)	<i>M</i>	6.4	5.9	5.9	6.3
	<i>SD</i>	2.9	2.7	3.2	3.4
Extremity of perceived attitudes	<i>M</i>	25.0	23.2	26.9	23.1
	<i>SD</i>	4.0	3.5	4.4	3.4
Agency of citizens in political minority	<i>M</i>	25.3	28.7	21.2	26.3
	<i>SD</i>	9.1	9.1	9.3	10.3
Voting likelihood of citizens in political minority	<i>M</i>	34.6	38.3	34.7	37.4
	<i>SD</i>	8.6	7.7	10.3	7.6

map/data interaction ($F(1,146) < .01, p = .97, \eta_p^2 < .001$); these results are presented in Table 1.

To analyze participants' ratings of political differences on each specific issue, the distance in centimeters (with a granularity of one millimeter) between each "R" and "D" mark was measured. These distances were summed to create an aggregate measure of perceived difference between the political beliefs of Republicans and Democrats. The 2×2 ANOVA revealed the predicted Map Color effect for real political issues: participants who viewed the Electoral map perceived greater political differences on the composite index of specific political issues than did participants who viewed the Proportional map ($F(1,138) = 7.50, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$). Importantly, however, the combined rated difference on the two filler issues was not affected by the Map Color manipulation ($F(1,144) = .01, p = .91, \eta_p^2 < .001$). The presence of numeric data did not affect ratings of real or filler issues ($F(1,138) = .01, p = .92, \eta_p^2 < .001$), nor was there a significant map/data interaction ($F(1,138) = .03, p > .87, \eta_p^2 < .01$) on ratings of either set of issues.

Perceived political attitudes of residents of red and blue states. A composite index of rating extremity was generated by reverse scoring participants' ratings of Massachusetts (strong Democrat) and Wisconsin (Democrat leaning) residents, summing them, and adding them to ratings of Alabama (strong Republican) and New Mexico (Republican leaning) residents. Analyzing this index revealed the predicted main effect of Map Color on perceived political attitudes: the Electoral map led to greater extremity in ratings than did the Proportional map ($F(1,144) = 19.96, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .12$). There was no significant main effect of Numeric Data

Presence ($F(1,144) = 2.08, p = .15, \eta_p^2 = .01$), although there was a marginally significant interaction ($F(1,144) = 2.93, p = .09, \eta_p^2 = .02$); the map effect was somewhat attenuated in the presence of numeric data.

Minority party participation measures. As noted, composite estimates of perceived influence and perceived voting likelihood were obtained by combining participants' estimates for the six target people (all of whom were members of the political minority in their state). As anticipated, there was a main effect of Map Color on both variables: participants who viewed the Proportional map believed that people in the political minority were more likely to influence the result of the election ($F(1,144) = 7.38, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$) and were more likely to vote ($F(1,144) = 5.28, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .04$) than were participants who viewed the Electoral map. In addition, there was a main effect of Numeric Data Presence, such that participants who viewed maps on which numeric data were displayed believed that minority voters were more likely to influence the election results ($F(1,144) = 4.24, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .03$). However, there was no main effect of Numeric Data Presence on perceived voting likelihood ($F(1,144) = .08, p = .78, \eta_p^2 < .01$), nor was there a Map Color \times Numeric Data Presence interaction on perceived influence ($F(1,144) = .29, p = .51, \eta_p^2 < .01$) or voting likelihood ($F(1,144) = .14, p = .71, \eta_p^2 < .01$).

To examine the hypothesized mediation of perceived voting likelihood by perceived influence, we used Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step model for testing mediation. First, in a regression analysis, we predicted voting likelihood from map color (dummy coded), $\beta = -.19, t(145) = -2.30, p = .02$, establishing the main path. Next, we tested the mediating variable of perceived influence and found that map color predicted perceived influence, $\beta = -.22, t(145) = -2.69, p < .01$, and that perceived influence predicted voting likelihood (when controlling for map color), $\beta = .25, t(145) = 3.03, p < .01$. Finally, we again regressed map color onto voting likelihood, this time controlling for perceived influence. This rendered the main path nonsignificant, $\beta = -.13, t(145) = -1.64, p = .10$. A Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) further confirmed that the effect of map color on perceived voting likelihood was mediated by perceived influence ($z = -2.01, p = .04$).

Discussion

This study provides the first empirical data of which we are aware showing the consequences of representations of electoral results on the perception of politics in America. Manipulating the manner in which electoral information was depicted influenced perceptions of polarization, political attitudes, political agency, and voting likelihood. Moreover, this influence occurred even in the presence of objective numeric data. Viewing the Electoral map led participants to perceive a more

divided nation, even when numeric data suggesting less divide were available. Furthermore, participants viewing the Electoral map saw the nation as more divided both in general and with respect to specific political issues. Exposure to Electoral maps thus polarized perceptions of political attitudes: residents of conservative states were seen as more conservative, and residents of liberal states were seen as more liberal, than when participants were exposed to Proportional maps. Last, participants viewing the Electoral map perceived people in the political minority within a state as having less political agency, which in turn led to the perception that such people were less likely to vote.

These findings are consistent with theoretical perspectives in the intergroup processes literature. It has long been known that sharper intergroup boundaries, greater category salience, and more meaningful bases of categorization – all interchromatic effects reinforced by the Red-Blue depiction – can intensify intergroup bias and potentially inflame conflict (Stangor et al., 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and there is reason to believe that the intrachromatic uniformity implied by depicting all red and all blue states identically may further contribute to stereotyping and bias (Ip et al., 2006).

It could be argued that our findings could be explained by demand characteristics: participants in the Proportional condition saw an unfamiliar gradient map (which contrasted with the electoral map they were accustomed to seeing in popular media), which could have led them to deduce our hypotheses and respond accordingly. Evidence from the perceived dividedness filler items, however, reduces this concern. Participants in the Electoral map condition indicated that they perceived greater differences than did participants in the Proportional condition, but only for actual political issues. Participants' indications of differences on filler issues did not differ by map condition. If demand were a primary determinant of perceived differences, one would expect that perceptions of difference on *all* issues, including filler issues, would differ between map conditions. This was not the case, suggesting that participants instead based their responses on their beliefs about real differences in political beliefs, and that these beliefs were influenced by exposure to the different maps.

It is particularly noteworthy that the Electoral map influenced perceptions even when numeric election results were available to perceivers. From a rational perspective, this is somewhat surprising, as numeric data provide an easily interpretable index on which to base judgments. Much extant research on the group attribution error (e.g., Allison & Messick, 1985) has been conducted in a between-targets fashion. That is, participants learn about one group with a particular distribution of attitudes, which is held constant. The group's decision rule is altered for different participants, and judgments of the group's attitudes are biased in the direction of the group decision even though the group members' attitudes are distributed identically. It is striking that corresponding biasing effects occurred in a *within-targets* situation, when participants had the ability to directly examine states that are very close to evenly split. Even though participants saw objective

numeric evidence that some red states were only 51% Republican and that some blue states were only 51% Democrat, they still perceived disproportionately large interchromatic differences. That perceived polarization and stereotyping can occur even in the context of such data demonstrates the powerful impact of salient intergroup boundaries, and may have important implications for perceived political agency, views, and corresponding behaviors.

The issue of whether America is truly divided is unresolved. Evidence on the question is mixed: it is variously argued that the divide is an illusion brought on by media portrayals and exploited by politicians (Fiorina et al., 2004), the divide is great and becoming ever-greater (Hill, 2005; Marlantes, 2004), the divide is in fact *smaller* than it has been in the past (Ansolabehere, Rodden, & Snyder, 2006), or that the divide—although indeed large—is nothing out of the ordinary and has always been present in American politics (Glaeser & Ward, 2006). We take no stand on this issue; this study does not address it. Two things, however, are clear: 1) that a dichotomous depiction of political attitudes is an exaggeration, and 2) that this exaggerated depiction can produce meaningful intergroup consequences that may influence political discourse, campaigns, and, possibly, election outcomes.

To an extent, categorization and other intergroup processes in politics are inevitable. Republicans and Democrats compete for votes and funding, and often advocate opposing positions on core political issues. The Electoral College, however, accentuates this effect by sorting the states in all-or-none fashion, bifurcating an otherwise continuous distribution. Moreover, of the many intergroup distinctions in American life (e.g., ethnic divisions, sex and gender distinctions, religious affiliations, etc.), few are institutionally based and federally mandated, as is the Electoral College. The Electoral College thus imposes a structure on American political attitudes that is both inaccurate from a measurement perspective and problematic from an intergroup relations perspective. Questions about the use of the Electoral College system are certainly not new, and a number of alternative approaches have been examined and proposed. These data suggest, however, that the use of the Electoral College—and the common visual representation of this system using the Red–Blue map—may actually foster division and impede effective governance. For example, this representation may exaggerate perceptions of perceived dividedness, reducing the likelihood of compromise. In addition, by influencing perceptions of political agency, Red–Blue maps could influence turnout, and thereby affect the allocation of electoral votes in states with close elections.

Even with the continued use of the Electoral College, there may be alternatives to depicting this system using the Red–Blue scheme. The Red–Blue map is appealing in many ways: it is visually attractive, easily produced and understood, and efficiently depicts the allocation of electoral votes. It is important, however, to be cognizant of such a map's other effects. We suggest that this presentational and perceptive simplification induces cognitive (over)simplification, resulting in distorted perceptions. The Red–Blue map displays a starkly polarized America composed of homogenous opposing political groups; it leads people to believe

that compromise is unlikely, that differences are deep and intractable, and that minority voters lack the ability to effectively express their views through political action.

There are alternatives to this depiction. Proportional maps similar to those used in this study convey more information, albeit at the cost of some perceptual clarity; such maps are occasionally used in mainstream media. The state-by-state proportional map accurately reflects the relatively balanced views existing in most states; a county-by-county proportional map would show the intrastate heterogeneity obscured by Red-Blue depictions. Other ways to display electoral results might include black-and-white maps, results presented in tabular form, or a cartogram (a map-like display that scales each state's size to reflect its population, electoral vote contribution, or another characteristic). Each of these depictions may well have its own effect on intergroup perceptions. It is clear that decisions about electoral depictions are not mere aesthetic preferences, but rather have important implications for political perception, cognition, and behavior. Maps can do much more than describe: they can also persuade, obscure, and deceive. As different depictions lead to different perceptions of the nation, people can (and assuredly will) choose depictions that serve their particular interests and agendas.

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