MCKAYLA MARIE MARTIN, KATELYN HUCK, CHRISTIEN WILLIAMS, DEBRA HULL, JOHN HULL. Psychology Department at Bethany College. Trigger words and the politics of polarization

Undergraduate participants read 16 commonly-used words and phrases which describe politics in the United States, such as conservative, patriot, and Democrat, then evaluated them on 1-5 scales measuring negative-positive emotional response, and comfort in hearing them in a virtual class, in a face-to-face class, and comfort in using them in private conversation. Participants also self-identified as politically conservative, moderate, or liberal (CML), and indicated their degree of support for four Constitutional rights -- free speech, assembly, required vaccination, and owning firearms.

Factor analysis of the words, phrases, and rights for emotional response showed an initial factor of 13 items with values higher than .45 or lower than -.45. Liberal" items – Democrat, Biden, liberal – were all weighted negatively, while "conservative" items, capitalism, Trump, gun support, patriotism – were all weighted positively. One-way ANOVAs using self-identified CML as the independent variable and emotional responses and private conversation comfort as dependent variables generally showed statistical significance (25 or 32 ANOVAs for terms and phrases, all four ANOVAs for rights). In all cases of statistical significance, Newman-Keuls post-hoc analyses showed at least the conservative-liberal comparison was significant. Correlated-groups t tests showed no significant differences in comfort of hearing items in virtual compared to face-to-face classes.

Our study demonstrates clear political polarization reflected in the words and terms used. Future studies could include additional terms, and examine the extent to which this polarization influences other aspects of individuals' lives, such as choosing friends, majors, or religious affiliations.