

The Social Research Laboratory

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ARIZONANS MISPERCEIVE RACIAL AND ETHNIC GROUP SIZES; MISPERCEPTIONS INFLUENCE TERMS OF POLITICAL DEBATE

A recent statewide survey found that Arizonans grossly overestimate the sizes of various racial and ethnic groups in Arizona and in the United States. People in Arizona also have an inaccurate understanding of who lies below the poverty line and which groups benefit most from federal social service programs. These findings suggest much of the political debate in this presidential year is founded on fallacy rather than fact. The survey results parallel a recent national survey which found Americans of all races and ethnicities overestimating the sizes of minority groups in this country.

The telephone survey was conducted by Northern Arizona University's Social Research Laboratory from February 5 to February 10, 1996. A random sample of 410 Arizonans participated in this survey. The margin of error for a survey of this size is +/- 5 percent.

MINORITY GROUPS SEEN AS LARGER THAN THEY REALLY ARE

Native Americans are a small percentage of the population, but that's not what Arizonans think. While Native Americans make up almost 6 percent of the Arizona population and less than 1 percent of the total United States population (according to Census Bureau figures), Arizonans believe Native Americans make up 21 percent of the Arizona population and 16 percent of the United States population. Similarly, Hispanics actually make up only 20 percent of Arizona's population and 10 percent of the U.S. population, but not according to Arizonans. On average, Arizonans believe Hispanics are 30 percent of the Arizona population and 25 percent of the U.S. population.

In contrast, the white population of Arizona is 89 percent of the state's total population and 79 percent of the nation's population. The white, non-Hispanic population of Arizona is 71 percent and approximately 70 percent of the total United States population. Arizonans, however, perceive whites to make up only 54 percent of the Arizona population and 53 percent of the nation's population.

These results strongly parallel findings from a 1995 Washington Post/Kaiser Foundation/Harvard University study of national attitudes. In that study, a national sample of Americans believed, on average, that whites constituted 50 percent of the

nation's population, African Americans made up 24 percent of the population, Hispanic Americans 16 percent, and Asian Americans 11 percent.

Fred Solop, director of the study, commented on the survey results, "Arizonans, and Americans of all types, perceive minority groups to be much larger than they really are. At the same time, people vastly underestimate the size of the white population. These perceptions, or, better yet, misperceptions, carry a profound ability to influence how people think about groups other than their own. Misperceptions often lead to misunderstandings."

Most survey respondents expect the size of minority populations in the United States to increase in the future. Over half of the survey respondents (56%) said they expect the number of minorities to increase a lot. One quarter of respondents (28%) expect the number of minorities to increase a little in the future.

Assuming that minority populations will be increasing, 45 percent of respondents thought this would not make much difference for the country. On the other hand, one quarter of respondents (28%) thought this would be a bad thing for the country. Sixteen percent said growing minority populations would be a good thing for the country.

MISPERCEPTIONS AFFECT UNDERSTANDING OF POLICY

Not only did survey respondents misperceive the size of minority groups in society, they also misperceived the composition of poor people in the country and who participates in government social service programs.

Approximately 13 percent of the nation's population falls below the poverty line. A majority of respondents to the Arizona survey (51%) believe most of these poor come from minority groups. Forty-six percent of respondents do not hold this belief. According to census figures, approximately two-thirds of poor people in the United States are white.

Also, 49 percent of respondents said they think most recipients of federal social service programs, such as welfare, Medicaid, and Head Start come from minority groups. Only 20 percent of respondents think most recipients of these programs do not come from minority groups. Government figures tell us that most recipients of federal social service programs are white.

"People's perceptions of who benefits from governmental programs are influenced by their sense of the size of various groups relative to the whole population. The terms of debate around many policy issues in our nation would be different if people had a better understanding of who actually benefits from these programs. These misperceptions can greatly affect the course of our nation as we move through a year of presidential politics and political discussion," Solop said.

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