In the United States, political parties are increasingly polarized, with large numbers of people believing that the two parties cannot even agree on basic facts. Partisans also tend to view the other side as unintelligent. Instead, my colleagues and I have found that it is those who are more, rather than less, intelligent who have the most polarized opinions. In particular, although measures of numeric ability, such as objective numeracy, are often used to index ability-related polarization, we have robustly found ideological differences to be more pronounced among those higher in verbal ability. In two large-scale longitudinal datasets (combined N = 5761), we investigated ability-related political polarization in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and documented ability-related polarization emerging over time. Those higher in ability were more polarized in emotional responses, risk perceptions, and product-purchase intentions. This polarization was mediated by selective exposure to partisan media and selective interpretation of numeric information. In a second investigation (N=1,222), we investigated the role of factual information in reducing this ability-based polarization. Once provided information, knowledge increased, but ability-related polarization in political opinions remained despite a coming together on the facts. This persistence of polarized opinions may be explained, at least in part, by participants higher in ability engaging in greater polarized evaluation of the information. Thus, higher ability partisans appear to engage in selective exposure, interpretation, and evaluation to support and defend their worldviews.

Brittany Shoots-Reinhard is a Senior Research Associate at University of Oregon and a Research Assistant Professor at Ohio State University. She is the Associate Director of the CAIDe Lab. She completed her B.S. in psychology and Ph.D. in social psychology from Ohio State. Her research interests include judgment and decision making, attitudes and persuasion, and motivation. She is particularly interested in factors influencing the efficacy of risk and science communications, such as cognitive ability, prior attitudes and beliefs, and political ideology. In addition, she studies how these factors interact with one another—for example, those with greater verbal ability are better able to reject misinformation and learn more from science communications, but also show greater political polarization in their subjective opinions (i.e., ability-related polarization).