



The prime psychological suspects of toxic political polarization

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Democracies welcome dissent, but when disagreements turn divisive, they can imperil social cohesion and become toxic to democracy. We review research on the psychological processes associated with toxic polarization. Prior work has generally focused on polarization as a consequence of ideological differences or affective evaluations. We assess recent research on these dimensions, and extend the scope to include psychological processes that motivate hostility in other intergroup settings, but that have only recently been examined in political contexts: dehumanization and ‘meta-perceptions’ (negative evaluations of the ingroup perceived to be held by the outgroup). By examining these processes in the context of equal-status, but ideologically opposite, groups, the research reviewed provides new insight into the ways intergroup evaluations are shaped by political ideological orientations.

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Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences 2020, 34:xx–yy

This review comes from a themed issue on **Emotion, motivation, personality and social sciences** *Political ideologies*

Edited by **John Jost, Eran Halperin and Kristin Laurin**

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.05.001>

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Political tensions are inevitable and potentially healthy for democracies. But the psychological forces that arise from ideological divisions can become toxic, leading to unforgiving partisan rancor [1,2], diminished bipartisan collaboration [3], and intractable partisan conflict [4]. A key challenge for those who study partisanship is determining which psychological processes are to blame for political hostility. Two prime psychological suspects that have been focused on most heavily in the previous

decades are ideological disagreements (i.e., ‘ideological polarization’) and negative affect rooted in tribal social identities (i.e., ‘affective prejudice’ or ‘affective polarization’) [5]. Here we review recent research on the role of ideological differences and affective prejudice in toxic polarization, and then extend the list of suspects to include two other processes newer to the scene: dehumanization and negative ‘meta-perceptions’ (inferences about what other groups think—in particular, what they think about the ingroup). We summarize evidence from recent research that has examined dehumanization and negative meta-perceptions among American political partisans. Together, this research allows us to identify and characterize the psychological processes that are most strongly associated with caustic forms of political polarization, and how they are inter-related. In addition, since previous research on dehumanization and meta-perceptions has almost exclusively involved groups defined by power and/or status asymmetries [6–10], examining dehumanization and meta-perceptions in the context of political partisans allows an examination of dehumanization and meta-perceptions across equal-status groups that are roughly equivalent in power, but that diverge in their adherence to political ideologies like conservatism and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). Thus, this research provides a better understanding of the psychological evaluations that underlie toxic polarization, and also how these psychological processes interact, or not, with influential ideological orientations. Finally, we discuss the opportunity these evaluations provide for the construction of interventions aimed at reducing polarization.

Ideological polarization

Around the world, contemporary divisions between political parties have been highlighted by high-profile disagreements over ideological issues. In the United States, longstanding debate between Democrats and Republicans about which types of immigrants should be allowed to enter the country and from where has reached a fever pitch (Daniller, 2019; URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/12/americans-immigration-policy-priorities-divisions-between-and-within-the-two-parties/>). In England, a ‘Divided Britain’ has emerged in which Conservative and Labour party members disagree strongly on whether to remain in or leave the European Union (Schumacher, 2019; URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/28/brexit-divides-the-uk-but-partisanship-and-ideology-are-still-key-factors/>). And in

India, Bharatiya Janata and Indian National Congress party members diverge on whether India should define itself as a Hindu state or remain secular and fundamentally inclusive (Masih and Joanna, 2019; URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/divided-families-and-tense-silences-us-style-polarization-arrives-in-india/2019/05/18/734bfdc6-5bb3-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html). Are these differences themselves innocuous outcomes of free thought and open discourse, or are they indicators and drivers of a dangerous divide between partisans that could fray democracy? It has long been suggested that ideological divisions could themselves lead to toxic polarization [11,12]. Most recently, evidence from four Western countries finds that as differences of opinions on social issues become more pronounced, distrust of political opponents increases, and when political opponents demonstrate ideological similarity, partisans treat partisan opponents more equitably [12].

One fundamental extension of the ideological polarization work is the finding that the ideological divide on a range of issues is perceived by both sides to be greater than it is in reality. This ‘False Polarization Bias’ [13] holds across a number of ideological issues, including taxation policies, immigration reform, abortion rights, and government spending [14–16] and has proven to persist over time. For example, sampling responses in the American National Election Study (ANES) from 1968 to 2008, Westfall *et al.* found that perceived attitude extremity remained consistently greater than actual attitude extremity for a number of political issues and has increased more rapidly than actual polarization over this time period [16]. Evidence from representative samples of Democrats and Republicans in 2019 reveal similar results, with both sides perceiving ideological polarization to be nearly twice as great as it is in reality across a number of social issues [17•].

Although levels of false polarization are associated with greater distrust of political institutions and harsher evaluations of partisan outgroup members and candidates [18•], these judgments may emerge as an indirect consequence of false polarization increasing negative affective evaluations of the political outgroup [19–21]. The intervening role of affective prejudice on the impact of (perceived) ideological differences on intergroup hostility [18•] highlights the importance of social identity processes among political partisans [5•]. In fact, affective prejudice has emerged as a favorite target of recent research on political polarization.

Affective polarization

Research on affective prejudice has provided a number of theoretical insights into partisan behavior [5•]. In particular, the use of feeling thermometers (or comparable measures) to assess affective prejudice provides a standard and validated measure that can be applied easily in political contexts. For example, Ward and Tavits asked

partisans to rate how much they liked/disliked political groups to assess the influence of affective prejudice on perceived ideological polarization across 43 elections in 34 countries. This research found that affective prejudice had a significant impact on perceptions of ideological differences between parties: partisans expressing greater affective prejudice were more likely to perceive strong ideological differences on political issues, even when the ideological differences were slight [22]. Since ideological differences can also feed partisan affect, perceived ideological differences and affective prejudice may fuel each other in a feedback loop that ultimately enflames partisan rancor. Feeling thermometers have also been used to track levels of affective prejudice over time. For example, in the United States, affective prejudice between Democrats and Republicans has been assessed regularly over the past 40 years, revealing 2016 as a 40-year high-watermark for inter-party prejudice, while reported liking of partisan ingroup members has remained consistently positive over the same time period [23•,24]. Similarly, high levels of affective prejudice toward partisan outgroups have been found across Europe over time [25,26]. Higher prejudice is associated with greater discomfort with cross-party social interactions [24,27] and reduced trust in the political outgroup party in power [28], which could increase purely partisan behaviors. In fact, higher levels of affective prejudice are associated with inter-party discrimination [29–31]. For example, those who harbor higher levels of affective prejudice are more likely to rate resumes associated with political ingroup members more favorably than those from the political outgroup [30,31], and are more likely to express greater willingness to give financial bonuses to partisan ingroup members and financial penalties to partisan outgroup members [29,31].

Dehumanization

Affective prejudice is thus associated with intentions and behaviors that favor the ingroup over the outgroup [24,27,29–31], and may fuel a desire for social distance from outgroup others that prevents bipartisan cooperation [5•]. However, political divisions can extend beyond ‘civil’ distancing, as evidenced by the willingness of partisans to endorse corrosive and illegal behaviors such as gerrymandering, which benefits a political party, but at the expense of the potential erosion of Democratic norms, and outright violence, such as the attempted and successful assassinations of political leaders in recent years by outgroup partisans in the U.S. and the U.K. (including shootings of Democratic representative, Gabby Giffords, and Republican representative, Steve Scalise, and the murder of Labour Party member Jo Cox in England). To examine the psychology associated with the more aggressive intentions and behaviors that characterize ‘toxic polarization’, recent research has tapped psychological processes that have been shown in other intergroup contexts to be associated with hostility and violence. In particular, blatant dehumanization has emerged in the

broader intergroup literature as an outgroup evaluation that is distinct from affective prejudice, and associated strongly with aggressive intentions, attitudes, and behavior (e.g., supporting torture and urging representatives to vote for war over peace; [7]).

In this previous research, blatant dehumanization has been almost exclusively examined in asymmetric intergroup contexts, where status differences are clear (e.g., toward Muslims and Mexican immigrants in the U.S. and toward the Roma minority and Muslim immigrants in Europe; [6,32]). In this research, lower-status groups are consistently and strongly dehumanized across cultural contexts. Importantly, blatant dehumanization is also aligned with ideological variables (such as Social Dominance Orientation and conservatism; [33,34]), and so largely a psychological evaluation expressed by those on the right of the political spectrum. Dehumanization is therefore of particular interest in the context of political partisanship, which is characterized by intentions and actions that can extend to outright aggression, but that are expressed between relatively equal-status groups. This research has found that blatant dehumanization is clearly relevant between political partisans on both sides of the ideological spectrum, who attribute more animalistic traits to political outgroup members and explicitly view political outgroups as less than fully human [35,36,37]. Dehumanization is also particularly strongly correlated, among both Republicans and Democrats, with support for spiteful activities associated with toxic polarization [17].

In addition to establishing the relevance of blatant dehumanization to political polarization, this work thus provides theoretical insight into the process of dehumanization. Unlike other intergroup contexts, research with political partisans shows that dehumanization of outgroup partisans is not relegated to those on the political right (e.g., Republicans) but is demonstrated just as strongly by those on the left (e.g., Democrats). And while conservatism correlates among Republicans with their dehumanization of Democrats, Democrats' dehumanization of Republicans is just as strongly correlated with strength of adherence to liberal ideology [17]. Therefore, liberals dehumanize just as readily and just as strongly as conservatives in this context, and dehumanization of the political outgroup is just as strongly associated with liberalism among Democrats as it is with conservatism among Republicans. Therefore, although liberal ideology is associated with the rejection of the idea that some groups are better than others (i.e., lower in Social Dominance Orientation) and liberals are less likely to dehumanize marginalized groups [34], adherence to liberal political ideology and rejection of social dominance does not immunize liberals from making dehumanizing evaluations; liberals apparently do not reject dehumanization as conceptually absurd or offensive but rather see dehumanization as a legitimate evaluation as

long as it is applied to the correct group (i.e., Republicans). Therefore, dehumanization has joined affective prejudice as a complementary psychological process that may help drive political partisans over the line of civil disagreement to more toxic behaviors that could poison partisan relations.

The reach of dehumanization does not end with evaluations of humanizing characteristics of the outgroup: as with ideological differences, the reach of intergroup dehumanization evaluations extends to 'second-order' evaluations. In particular, how much each group thinks they are dehumanized by the other informs how they evaluate that group, in turn.

Meta-perceptions in intergroup and political contexts

In the leadup to the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Democratic candidate Barack Obama was caught on camera expressing his views of rural Republicans: "They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them . . ." (Pilkington, 2008; URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/14/barackobama.uselections2008>). Four years later, in the 2012 elections, Obama's challenger, Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney, was captured on camera expressing his views about half of the people voting for Obama, ". . . [They] believe that they are victims, [they] believe the government has a responsibility to care for them . . ." (Davidson Sorkin, 2012; URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/mitts-forty-seven-per-cent-problem>). Finally, in 2016, Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton stated that a portion of her Republican challenger's supporters belonged in a 'basket of deplorables.' The Trump campaign picked up the statement, and emblazoned 'deplorables' on campaign materials, in an apparent attempt to enhance the ire that resulted from the negative evaluations apparently held by Clinton, and other Democrats, toward them. These comments by political leaders from both parties were widely believed to hurt their standing among the targets of these comments (members of the outgroup political party); an assertion that is supported by the wider intergroup literature: Negative inferences, like these, about what outgroup members think, particularly what they think about the ingroup (i.e., 'meta-perceptions'), are commonly held in intergroup contexts [9].

One consequence of negative meta-perceptions is that they may poison intergroup interactions: meta-perceptions are associated with the anticipation of aversive future interactions with outgroup members and with increased prejudice toward outgroup members. During actual interactions, these negative meta-perceptions serve as a threat to the perceiver's self-concept and social identity [10], which may further compromise the interactions. Negative meta-perceptions are also associated with overt hostility toward other groups through their effect on negative perceptions of the outgroup [38,39]. For example, the degree to which Muslims feel dehumanized by Americans predicts reactive dehumanization

of Americans, which in turn is associated with increased support for violent collective action, and unwillingness to work with law enforcement to prevent attacks by Muslim extremists [6,38]. Paralleling the findings on ideological polarization, meta-perceptions are subject to a pessimism bias: We think that outgroup perceptions about the ingroup are more negative than they are in reality [9].

Given the prominence of meta-perceptions in political discourse, and the potential for meta-perceptions to directly and indirectly drive intergroup hostility, meta-perceptions have recently been considered as another potential culprit that may inspire hostility between political partisans. This work shows that both Democrats and Republicans display a strong pessimism bias in meta-perceptions: In representative and convenience samples, both Democrats and Republicans think that their partisan outgroup dislikes (i.e., meta-prejudice) and dehumanizes (i.e., meta-dehumanization) their group 50%–300% more than the political outgroup does in reality. This pessimism bias is similar across both parties, and higher levels of dislike and dehumanization perceived to be held by the other side toward one's own are associated with support for policies that erode democratic norms and put party over country [17]. As in other intergroup contexts [6], much of the effect of meta-prejudice and meta-dehumanization comes indirectly, through their effect on prejudice and dehumanization.

Implications and future directions of meta-perceptions and political polarization research

Although recent research has broadened and deepened our understanding of political polarization, more research is needed to understand how meta-perceptions, perceptions, and ideology conspire to drive toxic political partisanship. First, although Moore-Berg *et al.* [17] demonstrated that erroneous meta-perceptions are correlated with a desire for greater social distancing from political opponents and support for spiteful inter-partisan behavior, more evidence is needed to establish the causal nature of this relationship.

Research is also needed to determine the potential antecedents of meta-perceptions, including cross-party friendships and contact, attitudes and expressions of political elites, and media exposure. As an initial step in this direction, recent research highlights the influential role that polarized social media and news consumption plays on affective and ideological polarization [40–47]. Polarized news media were found to lead to greater dislike of partisan outgroup members [45] and greater political conflict between partisan groups [48]. Specifically, in an analysis across 10 different countries, Yang *et al.* found that online news consumption was associated with perceived ideological polarization. Importantly, these findings were independent of actual attitude polarization [46]. Understanding the role of media on

dehumanization and meta-perceptions will be an important extension of this work.

One particularly exciting implication of incorporating the notion of meta-perceptions to the literature on political polarization is in the applied psychological interventions that can be developed to address or correct overly pessimistic meta-perceptions. Meta-perceptions are inferences about the minds of others, and convincing people that they are wrong about others' minds may be easier than convincing them they are wrong about their own minds (e.g., that they should like the other group more than they do). Additionally, since meta-perceptions are reliably false and pessimistic [17,38,49], they may be particularly amenable to correction [38,49]. Recent research suggests that it is possible to correct meta-perceptions, and consequently reduce intergroup hostility toward marginalized groups [38]. Additional evidence suggests that correcting the 'False Polarization Bias' can effectively reduce partisan hostility [49]; these past proofs of principle provide encouraging evidence that correcting false meta-perceptions may be a promising avenue of intervention among political partisans.

As a final implication and future direction, additional research is needed to understand the distinction between meta-perceptions in political contexts versus other protracted and violent intergroup conflicts. For example, in contexts that are based on religious and ethnic differences, meta-perceptions could be a byproduct of (violent) conflict and division and/or more accurate (i.e., meta-perceptions match perceptions). Thus, we encourage researchers to examine the accuracy of meta-perceptions in these contexts.

Concluding remarks

Research is only starting to emerge on the influential role of perceptions and meta-perceptions on political conflict, with researchers developing paradigms to understand the relationship between dehumanization, meta-perceptions, and political polarization. Understanding the full range of perceptions (and meta-perceptions) that drive hostile forms of political polarization may help us to better identify, safeguard against, or correct psychological processes that if left unchecked, may prove toxic to democracy. Here, we summarize the most recent research on the roles that ideological and intergroup perceptions and meta-perceptions play in intergroup hostility between political partisans. In particular, the fact that toxic forms of polarization are so strongly associated with dehumanization is striking, given that dehumanization has previously been documented almost exclusively in asymmetric and/or violent intergroup contexts. Dehumanization also transcends the typical psychological safeguard of liberal political ideology, demonstrating that it is a major concern for both Republicans and Democrats. But the influence of dehumanization on toxic polarization

also presents an opportunity: since dehumanization is logically and scientifically fallacious, it may be particularly amenable to intervention. Similarly, since meta-perceptions are reliably exaggerated and demonstrably false, they may be similarly susceptible to correction. Future research will have to determine whether these most noxious forms of intergroup perceptions are also brittle.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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 This paper examined the role of meta-perceptions in various competitive intergroup contexts. Correlational and experimental data revealed that people held a negativity bias for outgroup perceptions, as compared to ingroup perceptions. These inaccurate meta-perceptions were associated with beliefs that outgroup members intended to engage in obstructionism. However, intervening on these negative meta-perceptions with accurate information successfully reduced them.