

**Building Connective Democracy:
Interdisciplinary Solutions to the Problem of Polarisation ***

Christian Staal Bruun Overgaard, Anthony Dudo, Matthew Lease, Gina M. Masullo, Natalie
Jomini Stroud, Scott R. Stroud, and Samuel Woolley

Abstract:

Global concerns about misinformation have shed light on another escalating, and connected, international issue: political polarisation. After describing polarisation, its consequences, and its connection to misinformation, this chapter reviews research from across the social sciences, information sciences, and humanities in order to map out empirically sound and theoretically rigorous solutions to the harmful aspects of polarisation. These solutions are integral to building a new “connective democracy” in a world now defined by digital communication and the promises and perils of networked life.

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Polarisation and its Consequences

Recent decades have seen an increase in polarisation, or the extremization of beliefs, in several contexts and a surge in research on the topic. The vast majority of this research has focused on the nature, origins, and outcomes of polarisation; scholars have paid relatively little attention to how the negative consequences of polarisation can be mitigated. In this chapter, we use connective democracy – a new approach that seeks to reduce divisiveness and promote constructive discursive spaces – as a lens for understanding the problem, with an orientation towards bridging societal and political divides. To this end, we review recent advances from a variety of disciplines in search of practical and feasible solutions to the harmful consequences of polarisation.

There are different forms of polarisation, and they have been documented in democracies across the world, including countries in Africa (Michelitch 2015; Southall 2018), East Asia (Dalton and Tanaka 2007), Europe (Westwood et al. 2018; Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley in press), Latin America (Singer 2016), and the United States (Iyengar et al. 2019). One type of polarisation relates to specific issues. For example, during the last three decades, the American public has become increasingly polarised on a wide range of political issues, such as environmental laws, immigration, and governmental regulation of business (Pew Research Center 2014). Polarisation is also evident on scientific topics, such as climate change, nuclear power, and childhood vaccinations (Nisbet, Cooper and Garrett 2015; Pew Research Center 2015). Another type, affective polarisation, involves dislike and distrust of those holding opposing views (Iyengar et al. 2012). The rise of affective polarisation is particularly evident in the U.S. (Iyengar et al. 2019), but similar trends have been found in Europe, notably in the U.K.,

following the 2016 Brexit vote (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley in press). Yet another definition of polarisation, the percentage of Americans identifying as Republicans or Democrats, or the extremism of self-reported ideologies (on the liberal-conservative spectrum), shows little change over time (Gentzkow 2016). For our purposes, we focus on issue and affective polarisation and review solutions for combatting their detrimental consequences.

Scholars have offered several explanations for rising polarisation, including: negative political campaigning (Iyengar et al. 2019), polarising cues from political elites (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018), media coverage and framing of polarisation (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016), the use of politically like-minded media (Stroud 2011), the proliferation of social media (Settle 2018), and the increasing salience of partisanship as a social identity (Iyengar et al. 2012). These explanations make clear that interpersonal connections and mediated experiences contribute to polarisation.

Polarisation is worrisome because it strikes at central components of democracy. Well-functioning democracies depend on effective and equitable citizen participation, openness to persuasion, news media that hold powerful entities accountable, and citizen input into the political agenda (Dahl 1998). Polarisation can stymie each of these factors. This is not to say that all aspects of polarisation are democratically harmful; partisanship can have positive democratic effects, such as increased political participation (Rosenblum 2008). It becomes a threat to democracy, however, when it undermines free flows of information, respect for individuals, and open decision-making (Dewey 1984; Habermas 1984). When this occurs, the institutions of government function poorly. Polarisation incentivises political leaders to avoid collaboration because voters become dismissive of compromise on important issues, which can lead to political gridlock in formal decision-making institutions such as the U.S. Congress (Hetherington

and Rudolph 2015; Jacobson 2016). Polarisation can also harm social relationships; Americans, for example, discriminate against out-party members in both professional and everyday situations (see Iyengar et al. 2019).

Global polarisation is tied to the spread of mis/disinformation (the unintentional and intentional, respectively, spread of false and misleading content) (Jack 2017). Polarisation both exacerbates the spread of false content and the spread of misinformation can lead to polarisation.

A polarised electorate is more susceptible to misinformation. This is because people with more extreme attitudes are more likely to engage in motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990), which, in turn, can make people more likely to believe congenial misinformation. Van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet (2015) find that people with extreme opinions are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. Tucker et al. (2018), similarly, argue that partisanship predicts the types of information that people tend to believe. The outcome is that partisans not only disagree on political issues, but even perceive objective facts about the world differently – a tendency that has increased in the U.S. in recent decades (Jones 2019).

That the spread of misinformation also can exacerbate polarisation. For example, Cook (2016) argues that, beginning in the 1990s, politically motivated disinformation about the causes of climate change began to make many people doubt the scientific consensus on the issue. This led to a polarisation of views on the topic. Even a little misinformation can have real effects. Corner, Whitmarch and Xenias (2012) show increases in climate change scepticism after reading one editorial undermining scientific consensus on the issue alongside one that took the issue more seriously. In fact, Woolley and Howard (2018) find that digital propagandists often specifically target already polarised parties to inflame their polarisation. Given the negative

consequences of polarisation and their connection to misinformation, finding ways of reducing polarisation is paramount. We turn to these strategies next.

Solutions to the Problem of Polarisation

Connective democracy is a new way of thinking about the problem of polarisation. Rather than focusing on the nature and consequences of the problem, connective democracy asks scholars to think about solutions that bridge societal and political divides. Pragmatic solutions to these problems could scale by, for example, being incorporated into existing and new forms of digital technology that facilitate connectivity. In the next section we identify several potential solutions to the problem of polarisation.

Encouraging intergroup contact

A central finding in social psychology is that people tend to be prejudiced against members of their social out-groups (Allport 1954; Turner and Tajfel 1986). Such biases have led to discrimination against both racial and sexual minorities and, more recently, out-parties (Iyengar et al. 2019). Out-group biases are an ingrained part of human nature; in experiments, subjects discriminate against those in other groups – even when they are aware of the group assignment being random and meaningless (Turner and Tajfel 1986). As a possible solution to the problem of out-group prejudice, a long line of psychology research, going back to Gordon Allport's (1954) seminal book *The Nature of Prejudice*, documents that intergroup contact can reduce out-group biases and intergroup hostility (for a review, see Pettigrew and Tropp 2013). Various forms of intergroup contact have been shown to reduce many types of prejudice, such as discrimination against the LGBT community (Rössler and Brosius 2001; Schiappa et al. 2005)

and Muslims (Bruneau et al. 2019). Intergroup contact has also been found to decrease racial discrimination (Goldman 2012; Harwood, Qadar, and Chen 2016).

In its most basic form, intergroup contact occurs when people meet and interact with someone from their out-group. The positive effects of such contact are contingent on the contact being positive and on the people involved having shared goals. Also, the people involved must perceive each other as realistic representations of the social groups they are representing and this group membership must be salient (Allport 1954; Goldman 2012). There are several explanations for why such contact can reduce biases: Meeting an out-group member can demystify the out-group and increase familiarity, make people less afraid of future contact with out-group members, and enhance people's empathy for the out-group. In a meta-analysis of more than 500 studies, Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) find evidence of all of these pathways – with strongest effects for fear and empathy. Similarly beneficial effects may arise from awareness of intergroup friendships (for a meta-analysis, see Zhou et al. 2019) and imagined contact with outgroup members (for a meta-analysis, see Miles and Crisp 2014).

In the context of affective polarisation, however, the most promising type of intergroup contact may be *mediated intergroup contact* – which, for example, happens when people see sympathetic out-group members on TV or hear positive intergroup interactions on the radio. Survey data suggest that people who experience more mediated intergroup contact with a given out-group are less prejudiced towards that out-group (Goldman 2012; Schwab, Sagioglou and Greitemeyer 2019). Experimental work, where some subjects experience mediated intergroup contact with their out-group and others do not, confirms this result. People who experience mediated intergroup contact tend to become less prejudiced against their out-group members. This has been shown in a wide range of contexts, including prejudice toward people with

different racial backgrounds (Ramasubramanian 2015; Harwood, Qadar, and Chen 2016; Kim and Harwood 2020), the LGBT community (Rössler and Brosius 2001; Schiappa et al. 2005), and people with tattoos (Rössler and Brosius 2001). What has received less scholarly attention is how mediated contact may influence affective polarisation. An exception to this is Huddy and Yair (2019), who find that subjects reading a news article about a friendly social encounter between two opposing party leaders feel less hostile towards members of the out-party compared to those reading about an unfriendly social encounter between the two leaders. Although more research is needed to understand how mediated intergroup contact works in a political context, it constitutes a promising solution to the problem of polarisation.

Correcting misperceptions

Given the linkages between mis/disinformation and polarisation, tactics that help to reduce misperceptions also may have the benefit of reducing polarisation. *Corrective messaging* refers to tactics that, in various ways, present accurate information to mitigate the impact of misinformation or misperceptions. We review three such tactics below.

Immediate corrective messaging refers to the practice of providing accurate information immediately following exposure to misinformation. Several scholars find that this tactic can effectively reduce false beliefs (e.g. Goldfarb and Kriner 2017; Vraga and Bode, 2017; although see Garrett and Weeks, 2013). A recent meta-analysis by Walter and Tukachinsky (2020) shows that corrective messaging is most effective when done immediately after exposure to misinformation rather than later. Corrective messaging may be a way to reduce polarisation by reducing the misperceptions that undergird it.

A related tactic, prebunking, refers to pre-emptively refuting misinformation before people encounter it. As Cook (2016) points out, research suggests this approach is more effective than correcting misinformation after the fact. Likewise, Bolsen and Druckman (2015) find evidence of prebunking's ability to reduce the influence of misinformation. Their research suggests that prebunking is more effective than debunking. Many studies have demonstrated the ability of prebunking to reduce the impact of misinformation (for a meta-analysis, see Banas and Rains, 2010).

A third tactic involves making people aware of misperceptions relating to polarisation. Although some forms of polarisation have increased in recent decades, many people think that the problem is worse than it is. The American public, for example, tends to overestimate how divided the country is (Ahler 2014; Westfall et al. 2015). Such exaggerations are not without consequences. Yudkin and colleagues (2019) find that people who have more extreme perceptions of how divided the country view their political opponents more negatively. Perceptions of extreme polarisation can, as Ahler (2014) points out, become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If this is the case – and, as described below, there is reason to believe that it is – one way of mitigating inter-party hostility may be to correct the public's misperceptions regarding polarisation.

Experimental work indeed finds that correcting people's misperceptions about polarisation can be a way to bridge divides. Ahler (2014) randomly assigned subjects to learn about the actual political positions of most Americans – which tend to be less extreme than what people assume. This led the study participants to adopt more moderate political opinions (although, for a conflicting finding, see Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). Similarly, Ahler and Sood (2018) found that Americans overestimate the proportions of partisans belonging to party-

stereotypical groups (for example, Democrats who are LGBT or Republicans who are wealthy) and that these misperceptions exacerbate affective polarisation. What's more, in two follow-up experiments, correcting these misperceptions improved the subjects' attitudes towards out-party members. Other recent experimental work documents that correcting misperceptions can be a way to bridge political divides (see van Boven et al. 2018; Freeder 2019). Research on the effects of correcting misperceptions is still developing; nevertheless, it is a potentially effective solution to the problem of polarisation – and a fruitful avenue for future research.

Priming superordinate identities

Another possible solution is making people think of themselves less in terms of their issue, group, and partisan affiliations and more in terms of other social identities. As Iyengar and Krupenkin (2019) show, partisanship has become one of the most salient social identities in America; this, in turn, may make Americans more hostile towards their out-party. Further, recent studies suggest that decreasing the salience of people's partisan identities can decrease affective polarisation. Levendusky (2018a) demonstrates that priming Americans' national identity reduces affective polarisation – likely because it reduces the salience of their partisan identities. The same result emerged in a follow-up natural experiment, where affective polarisation among survey respondents was lower among those who responded close to the Fourth of July – most likely because this day primed their national identity vis-à-vis their partisan identities. Similarly, in another natural experiment, Carlin and Love (2016) illustrate that Americans' 'trust gap' – i.e., their tendency to trust co-partisans more than rival partisans – narrowed during the time of Osama bin Laden's assassination in 2011.

Priming people's national identity may, however, have harmful consequences.

Wojcieszak and Garrett (2018) uncover, across three experiments, that priming national identity makes American immigration opponents more affectively polarised. A way to overcome this limitation may be to make people think of their shared humanity – rather than their national identity. Work on *dehumanisation* lends credence to this idea. In an experiment, Albarello and Rubini (2012) primed the superordinate identities of white Italian undergraduates (i.e., made their *human* identities salient) and used “multiple categorisation” (by providing additional information about people besides skin colour – such as age, gender, and religion). These two interventions decreased subjects' dehumanisation of the person being described. Priming the salience of certain identities may help to alleviate the discrimination that can result from polarisation; however, further research is needed to fully understand these effects.

Possible solutions that need refinement

Although it is useful to learn about solutions that seem to address polarisation, it is also worthwhile to review solutions with inconsistent evidence about their ability to reduce polarisation and solutions that seem to inflame, rather than reduce, polarisation. We review several such solutions below.

One proposed solution, with several studies providing preliminary support, draws from *self-affirmation* theory. Self-affirmation occurs when people see themselves positively (Steele and Liu 1983), such as when people think about their talents or aspects of their lives in which they excel. Applied to polarisation, people who have been self-affirmed are more likely to engage thoughtfully with views unlike their own (e.g., Binning et al. 2010), which can reduce polarisation. Yet subsequent evidence is less optimistic about the efficacy of self-affirmation for

curbing polarisation; self-affirmation can increase polarisation under some circumstances (van Prooijen et al. 2012) and fail to make any difference in others (Levendusky 2018b). Despite initial promise, there is a need for caution in seeing self-affirmation as a solution to polarisation.

Another proposed solution is to *prime partisan ambivalence* and encourage people to think about the desirable attributes of an opposing political party. Recognizing the positive attributes of undesirable policies or polities might make people's attitudes less polarized. Efforts to prime partisan ambivalence, however, have not found any such effects on those with stronger partisan attitudes, although there appear to be some effects among moderates (Levendusky 2018b). This is explained by the difficulty that stronger partisans have in articulating desirable aspects of an opposing party.

A third solution involves encouraging people to recognize their lack of in-depth knowledge. People overestimate their understanding of how things work, which is known as the *illusion of explanatory depth*. Some research suggests that awareness of this over-confidence can lead to more moderate attitudes (Furnham et al. 2013), yet additional research did not find evidence that prejudice towards those with different views was affected by a similar manipulation (Voelkel et al. 2018).

A fourth potential solution with particular relevance to science communication, *consensus messaging*, warrants additional examination. Especially relevant within the issue of climate change (Cook 2016), consensus messaging conveys the degree of agreement among experts about a scientific topic. Some studies suggest that consensus messaging can significantly increase perceived consensus and acceptance of anthropogenic climate change (Bolsen, Leeper and Shapiro 2014; Myers et al. 2015), as well as support for vaccinations (van der Linden, Clarke and Maibach 2015). Other research, however, has cast doubt on the efficacy of this

approach (e.g., Dixon and Hubner 2018). More research on consensus messaging is needed and should be designed to reflect real-world conditions where accurate and misinformation co-exist (Cook 2016). Telling people the conclusions of experts, it seems, is not always sufficient to curb polarised beliefs and attitudes.

A final, often discussed, solution is education in *critical reading and thinking skills* and the importance of getting information from multiple sources. Education remains essential so that people can be savvy information consumers and effectively use new technologies with an appreciation for their capabilities and limitations. Yet identifying effective media literacy messaging to curb the spread of misinformation and combat polarisation is not always straightforward, with several projects turning up null results (e.g., Stroud 2011; Vraga, Bode and Tully 2020). More research on these proposed solutions may turn up more encouraging evidence, but to date, they do not seem to be viable solutions to polarisation.

Scalable solutions

The theories discussed above are rooted in psychology and offer theoretical rationales and empirical evidence for their ability to reduce the harmful consequences of polarisation. Yet another important criterion for thinking of solutions is scalability. A successful in-person intervention building on interpersonal contact theory may work for the forty people involved, but the extent of polarisation requires more far-reaching ideas.

The limitations of scale can easily be seen when evaluating approaches that ask people to fact-check information for themselves. These types of interventions quickly run afoul of the reality that information tracking and sense-making have become increasingly difficult. Effective

information technologies can help us manage this information deluge. Social media platforms are estimated to employ over 100,000 human moderators to help filter objectionable content, and new programs have been announced to figure out how to scale up misinformation efforts (Facebook 2019). In addition to human efforts, algorithms can be created to automatically remove content, and to select and prioritize what content human moderators should review next. These efforts can be, and are being, employed at scale to try to reduce mis/disinformation and, in turn, polarisation. Other ideas offer similar potential to scale. Mediated interpersonal contact, for example, doesn't require people to meet in person, and even relatively small effects can be more cost-effective than more in-depth interventions.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid out the problem of polarisation, its democratic consequences, and its intertwinement with the spread of misinformation. Using the perspective of connective democracy, we have reviewed possible solutions to these problems. Some solutions seem to have more promise than others. Ensuring that solutions can scale, whether through algorithmic approaches or using the media, is an important criterion when sorting through possible solutions.

The reviewed solutions all have limitations – and the research in this area is still in its infancy. Even the more promising approaches, such as intergroup contact, do not work in all circumstances and have not been thoroughly tested in political contexts. Priming superordinate identities is promising, but if national identity is primed it can exacerbate polarisation of attitudes towards people of other nationalities (Wojcieszak and Garrett 2018). Algorithms and machine learning efforts are nascent in understanding the idiosyncrasies of human speech. Some

strategies, such as fact-checking, can backfire and reinforce misinformation (Nyhan and Reifler 2010).

Our review of the literature suggests we need more – much more – research to fully understand how to solve the problems posed by polarisation. Research is needed to parse how intergroup contact works in a political context, how misperceptions can be corrected to ease polarisation, and which specific social identities can be primed to curb polarisation and without causing other problems. These approaches also have been studied more frequently in an American context; future research should explore if and how they work in other cultures. In sum, we need more research that focuses on solving the problem of polarisation – rather than merely describing it – to build a connective democracy that breaks down barriers between opposing groups.

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