

MEMO: Social Identity and Social Cognition Effects on Polarization

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From: Lea Booth
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Summary

Social identity and social cognition drive perceived and affective polarization by heavily influencing mass partisan beliefs (Ahler 2016). However, the effects of social identity and cognition are contested by scholars who believe that policy preferences and reasoned weighing of political leaders' actions are more important factors for individuals' partisan beliefs than identity and cognition (Huddy 2015). Despite the disagreement, the social identity argument holds more explanatory value.

Definitions

- 1) Social Identity is a subjective process of defining oneself as a member of a group of people. The strength of this identification can vary and correlates to the amount of in-group bias and perceived difference from other groups (Huddy 2015).
- 2) Social Cognition is the set of beliefs an individual holds about other people and groups (Ahler 2016). Social identity affects social cognition, but they are distinct processes.
- 3) Perceived Polarization is how polarized the public believes politics to be, as opposed to how polarized politics actually is (Lelkes 2016).
- 4) Affective Polarization is how an individual feels about perceived out-groups. The more individuals dislike those they perceived to be outside of their group, the more affectively polarized politics is (Lelkes 2016).

The Effects of Social Identity and Social Cognition

The social identity and social cognition argument holds that these social factors motivate polarization because people place themselves in groups and perceive parties to be made up of groups. Individuals select their parties based on the group or groups they identify with and wish to associate with, which in turn affects how they see out-groups. As social identifications become stronger, so do the positive emotions of group victory, the anger of group loss, and the vilification of out-groups (Huddy 2015). The emotional effects of social identity greatly influence affective polarization. Stereotypes about which groups belong to each party increase when an individual is considering the opposing party. Intense stereotypes from partisan identification raise the perceived extremism and animosity towards the other group (Ahler 2016). The stereotypes that result from social identification increase affective and perceived polarization.

Social identity can also drive and magnify factual misinformation espoused by partisans. Scholars dispute why Americans seemed to be misinformed about politically relevant facts. One explanation called *directionally motivated reasoning* holds that misinformation comes from the partisan habit of looking for facts to justify already-held beliefs, instead forming beliefs after the facts. This view implies that individuals truly believe the falsehoods they defend. An alternate explanation, *expressive responding*, argues that individuals report misinformation they know to be false in order to support and show their identity with their political group. Academics have not been able to demonstrate which theory has more explanatory power since distinguishing between the two requires determining whether voters knowingly give false information. However, the expressive responding argument provides a reason to be optimistic. If voters are expressively responding to questions regarding their beliefs, then they are less misinformed than they appear to be (Schaffner & Luks

2018). Expressive responding and directionally motivated reasoning speak help explain the mechanisms that drive social identity's effect on perceived and affective polarization.

The Case for Social Identity and Social Cognition Over Alternatives

The policy or instrumental argument is mostly opposed to the social cognition explanation for polarization. This argument holds that individuals support parties that consistently represent and act on the individual's preferred policy preferences (Franklin and Jackson 1983). However, the masses hold positions inconsistent with their professed ideologies and often follow whatever positions their elites invest time in propagating to their supporters. Evidence for the primacy of the social identity theory over the instrumental theory are below:

- Roughly 30% of conservatives have liberal economic and political policy stances (Ellis and Stimson 2012)
- Despite the increasing polarization and ideological consistency of party elites, the number of citizens whose policy beliefs agree with their party orthodoxy has not increased (Ellis and Stimson 2012)
- Only 17% of voters can assign ideological labels to the appropriate party and can explain, at least partially, what "conservative" and "liberal" mean (Klein 2017).
- Strengthened partisan identities do not necessarily mean that partisans agree more with the platform. Partisan identity can instead be fueled by social identity (Huddy 2015)
- Ardent partisans change their policy positions when their corresponding elites do, even if those positions are not supposed to be in their ideology. People do not generate policy opinions and then pick their leaders. They identify with their group, and then follow those elites (Cohen 2003)

Takeaways for polarization and politics

1. Some commentators decry the perceived rise of identity politics. However, social identity and cognition theory show that identity has always been a key driver of mass politics and polarization (Ahler 2018).
2. If voters choose their political leanings on group and not policy, then candidates do not need to run on policy per se; they can run by activating the emotions of their groups through slogans and emotion appeals (Huddy 2015).
3. Voters who make decisions based on their group's consensus may be more likely to accept false information spread by their elites (Schaffner and Luks 2017).
4. Yet, these voters may also know that their elites' misinformation is false and use misinformation to support and identify with their political groups (Schaffner and Luks 2018).

Interactions with alternate psychological explanations

- Geographic sorting holds that Congress is more polarized because people of similar beliefs and values are living nearer to each other (Thomson and Sussell, 2015). This view reinforces the social identity explanation, because desire for group belonging is more important in moving than policy beliefs.
- Authoritarian tendencies include the want and respect of order and a distrust of outsiders, which has become increasingly concentrated in the Republican Party (Mason and Davis 2016). More intense group identification raises the fear and perceived threat of outsiders and loss of status (Huddy 2015). Therefore, this authoritarianism may be generated by committed social identity and whites' perception of status challenge.

Sources

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The author's arguments concerning social identity and polarization come from his survey where he evaluated the effects of stereotyping parties using the perceptions Americans have of the composition of each party. He asked participants what percentage of Democrats they thought were union members, LGBT, Black, and atheist or agnostic. For Republican groups, he asked participants what percentage of Republicans were southerners, over 65 years of age, evangelical, and earn over \$250 thousand a year. All Americans overestimated the percentage of the groups in each party. Unfortunately, people who identify as part of parties had higher overestimations of the opposing party than other Americans, and these higher misperceptions fueled affective polarization and perceived polarization. Ahler found that social identification with a partisan group increases stereotyping and polarization. Ahler uses this evidence to minimize the role of policy preferences in Americans' political behavior.

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