

## The Psychology of Group Polarization

Humans are social creatures. We feel most comfortable around people with whom we have something in common, and so we tend to gather into groups. These affiliations may be based on family, ethnicity, religion, gender, race, geography, particular interests, and politics. Sometimes groups clash in their values, perspectives, and goals, which leads to clashes between individuals. You don't have to look far to find such clashes in today's news. A series of recent articles by psychologists studying the individual and group factors that create these clashes provides new insights into their causes and suggests ways to reconcile them.

A recent article in the *American Psychologist* (Jung et al., 2019) describes how groups polarize positions. The authors define **polarization** as the tendency for group positions to become more extreme than the positions individual members held before they joined the group. They note that group membership generally requires group conformity. Groups of people are also more likely than individuals to seek out information that supports the group position, and they tend to avoid information that doesn't support the group position. Consequently, only information that supports group positions is open for discussion by members. Group loyalty leads to competition among group members to promote more extreme positions and to exclude contrary positions. Finally, group members tend to migrate to neighborhoods (either geographic or online) where they are surrounded by like-minded persons, which prevents them from experiencing opposing views.

Other research demonstrates how political party affiliations promote polarization. A study by New Zealand psychologists at the University of Auckland (Satherley et al., 2018) surveyed public opinion about changing the NZ flag to eliminate the reference to the British Empire. Polls were conducted several times during the course of debates about the issue. When first proposed in 2013 only 28% of the National Party endorsed the idea, while about 37% of the Labour Party endorsed it. However, after the country's Prime Minister (a member of the National Party) promoted the idea, nearly 60% of National Party members endorsed it and support by Labour Party members fell to 30%. The researchers noted that about one quarter of the members from each party changed their opinions to align with their party preference. Likewise in the United States, researchers examined the support of Democrats and Republicans for Cap and Trade policies to combat climate change (Boven et al., 2018). They found that support for Cap and Trade rose among Democrats and fell among Republicans when promoted by Democrats. However, when promoted by the Republicans, support for Cap and Trade rose among Republicans and decreased among Democrats.

As illustrated above, group membership tends to generate extreme views. Extremism is not unique to a particular culture or nation, suggesting that common psychological factors contribute to extremism. A recent article by two psychologists from The Netherlands (van Prooijen &

Krouwel, 2019) suggests four common features of political extremism. The first is psychological distress. Persons who are distressed seek security and look up to a leader who will protect them. Distressed persons also tend to engage in either-or thinking. Things are either bad or good. If the situation is bad, there can be nothing good about it. People are either OK or not-OK. Actions are either right or wrong. Such thinking leads to simplifying complex problems into simple problems with simple solutions. Thinking in terms of simple solutions leads to overconfidence, another feature of political extremism. People who engage in extreme thinking tend to be selective in the information on which they base their conclusions, but they also tend to be very confident about their conclusions. This overconfidence extends to other aspects of their decision-making. For example, when playing number estimation games, political extremists are more confident about their guesses than are non-extremists. Finally, intolerance is a feature of political extremism that leads to prejudice against groups with other values and beliefs. Strong moral convictions have been shown to predict intolerance.

Van Prooijen and Krouwel note that political extremism applies to both the left and the right. They cite evidence from The Netherlands that Dutch extremists of both political parties display a high degree of intolerance toward the views of the other party. Their conclusions do not support either leftist or rightist movements but suggest that there is something about human nature that causes us to be susceptible to all-or-nothing thinking, a subject Lee Ross of Stanford University explores more fully in a recent issue of *Perspectives of Psychological Science* (Ross, 2018). Dr. Ross identifies what he calls the truly fundamental attribution error, which he defines as our tendency to think of ourselves as rational and those who think otherwise as irrational. Examples of this objectivity illusion are everywhere. Consider comedian George Carlin's famous quote:

“Have you ever noticed when you're driving that anyone who's driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone driving faster than you is a maniac?”

Ross summarizes several decades of research that reveals three fundamental features of human thought, which he dubs naïve realism:

- 1) My own view of the world is realistic and objective.
- 2) Other people who are reasonable and open-minded must share my view of the world.
- 3) Those who don't share my view of the world are unreasonable and/or irrational.

Ross cites numerous studies similar to those mentioned above demonstrating how our individual positions on contentious topics influence our beliefs about others' views. For example, Liberal Christians and Conservative Christians have vastly different views about what Jesus would do in treating gays, immigrants, the wealthy, and pregnant women. Their predictions align with their own views. Another example is a college study in which students were asked to rate university financial divestment plans during the era when some of the university holdings were located in Apartheid South Africa. When given a choice between the university plan and an alternative plan, students favored the alternative plan even though the university plan divested more money

from the South Africa holdings. The conflict was thus framed as “the students” versus “the establishment.”

Ross also notes that people are more tolerant of views that conflict with their own when they are not stressed out. This ability to tolerate conflicting opinions fades quickly when the future looks uncertain.

Together these articles provide us food for thought about our own beliefs and how we interact with those who hold other beliefs. Joining groups with extreme political views is not likely to solve many of the world’s problems. It is also important to keep in mind that all groups consist of individuals who have many things in common, even if the groups oppose each other. Those who oppose our positions are not necessarily morally inferior, and they may not be entirely wrong. There is usually more than one way to look at a situation and likely more than one solution to a problem. Collectively these articles suggest that solving the world’s problems will require engagement with people who think differently than we do. Such engagement will require members considering the perspective of the other group.

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*Van Prooijen, J-W. & Krouwel, A.P.M., 2019. Psychological features of extreme political ideologies. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 28, Pages 159-163*