



AMERICA'S DIVIDED MIND

Understanding the Psychology
That Drives Us Apart

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ABOUT BEYOND CONFLICT

For nearly 30 years, Beyond Conflict has created powerful and innovative frameworks to open pathways for progress in peace talks, transitions to democracy, and national reconciliation in the aftermath of division and violence in over 75 countries. Building on this body of experience, we have partnered with cognitive and behavioral scientists to create the Beyond Conflict Innovation Lab, which brings forward a new framework at the intersection of behavioral sciences and real-world experience. Beyond Conflict's goal is to apply brain science to design and promote new tools that reduce conflict, increase tolerance, and facilitate positive social change in the United States and abroad. Beyond Conflict is a non-partisan, evidence-based, global non-profit focused on tackling an array of social challenges.

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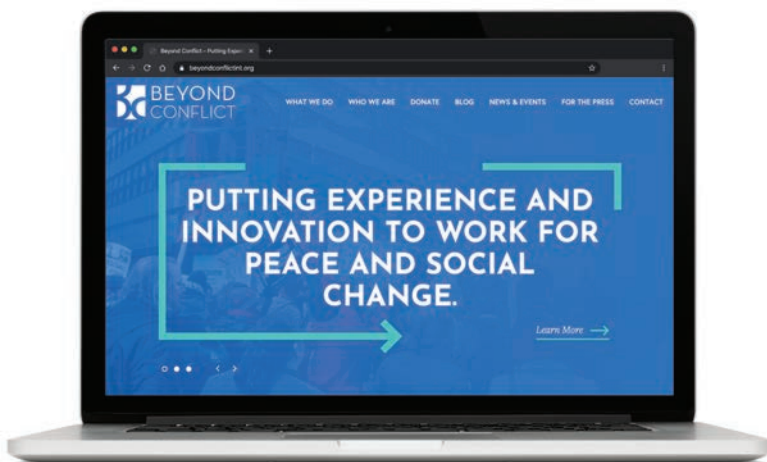
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ABOUT THE POLARIZATION INDEX PROJECT

Existing measures of polarization, such as polls and voting patterns, don't accurately capture its psychological underpinnings. Using insights from brain and behavioral science, Beyond Conflict is creating a nationwide polarization instrument, named the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index™, a diagnostic tool designed to give comprehensive insight into psychological processes of polarization and their causes. This tool will allow us to measure the state of polarization over time, create programs tailored to the psychology of specific regions, develop an approach for countering polarization, and communicate to the public about polarization's risks and consequences.

This report presents a framework for understanding and addressing polarization in the US. It includes a digestible summary of initial results from the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index along with actionable recommendations. For the academic article describing the full methods and comprehensive analyses, please refer to Moore-Berg, S.L., Ankori-Karlinsky, L., Hameiri, B., & Bruneau, E. (2020). Exaggerated Meta-Perceptions Predict Intergroup Hostility Between American Political Partisans. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/d6bpe>.



Visit us online at beyondconflictint.org to learn more about Beyond Conflict and the Polarization Index Project.



Executive Summary

OVERVIEW

Deepening political polarization in the United States is a profound threat to the American people and to the very core of American democracy.¹ As polarization worsens, it will continue to undermine the social fabric of the nation, drive Americans further apart, and make it more difficult to find collaborative ways to address urgent challenges.

After 30 years of working around the globe to bring peace and reconciliation to deeply divided societies, Beyond Conflict launched an unprecedented research project in 2018 with leading brain and behavioral scientists, Emile Bruneau and Samantha Moore-Berg at the University of Pennsylvania, to assess the psychological factors that fuel polarization. Our findings show that Americans are not as divided as they think they are. The goal of this report is to use the psychological insights to develop strategies that enable individuals, institutions, and leaders to address the increasing threat of extreme polarization.

When polarization in the United States becomes more about identity than disagreement on issues, it becomes toxic. Increasingly, Americans who identify themselves as either Democrats or Republicans view one another less as fellow citizens and more as enemies who represent a profound threat to their identities, creating a form of American sectarianism. Toxic polarization, like violent sectarianism in many parts of the globe, distorts our view of reality. This leads people to

underestimate what they have in common and creates a vision of the world that is defined by a destructive "Us vs. Them" mentality. Our results suggest that the

Our findings show that Americans are not as divided as they think they are.

United States is now facing toxic polarization.

Once we adopt the lens of "Us vs. Them," a range of unconscious psychological processes take root that accelerate toxic polarization and distort the ways we see one another and understand the world around us. When this mindset develops, compromise with the other side is viewed as weakness or betrayal, and their gain is seen as our loss. Toxic polarization must be addressed with a sense of urgency and a deeper understanding of how polarized psychology works.

Over the past year, we began tracking indicators of polarized psychology using the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index™, a new actionable diagnostic tool that will measure the psychological factors that fuel toxic polarization and point us toward action. We conducted three national surveys over nine months ending in August 2019.² This allowed us to develop a new set of measures to track the psychological factors that drive us apart, but more importantly

that could also bring us together.³ In particular, we focused on three factors that are strong indicators of polarized psychology: dehumanization, dislike, and disagreement. We also examined several consequences of toxic polarization.

FINDINGS

Our results offer reasons for concern, but they also offer reasons for hope:

- We found significant levels of polarization between Democrats and Republicans, as seen through measures of dehumanization, dislike, and disagreement. However, we also found that **Americans believe that members of the other party dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with their own party about twice as much as they actually do.**
- These misperceptions are not a fringe phenomenon solely driven by the most extreme members of both parties. Large majorities of both **Democrats and Republicans substantially exaggerate the extent to which members of the other party dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with them**—creating a significant divide between perception and reality.
- The more we feel disliked and dehumanized by members of the other party, the more likely we are to express greater dislike and dehumanization toward them. In this way, **the divide between actual and perceived dislike and dehumanization can create a downward spiral of hostility that fuels further toxic polarization.**
- We also found significant misperceptions about **the amount of disagreement on two of the most divisive policy issues facing the nation—gun control and immigration.** Perceived disagreement between Republicans and Democrats regarding these key issues is nearly twice as large as actual disagreement.

- **The depth of the divide between perceived and actual levels of enmity is correlated with outcomes that are harmful to American democracy,** including: support for actions that benefit one's political party at the expense of the country; lower levels of trust in the country's civic institutions, such as the Supreme Court and Congress; and a growing discomfort with, and isolation from, members of the other party, such as having a member of the other party serve as your doctor or your child's teacher.

The significant divide between perception and reality captured by the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index™ offers an important opportunity to empower Americans to counter toxic polarization. Many Americans do not recognize this divide exists, and even if they do, they may not know what to do about it. If left unchecked, these divides can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is why it is critical to correct and counter them now. By demonstrating that Americans are not as divided as they think they are, we can take actions to correct these misperceptions and increase the likelihood of engagement and effective dialogue across party lines.

Americans believe that members of the other party dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with their own party about twice as much as they actually do.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research and experience suggest that the following **four actions** could help in confronting the psychological factors that drive us apart. At the core of these approaches is the recognition that in an environment of toxic polarization, talking with the

"enemy" is seen as betrayal and comes with great perceived risk to your reputation and group standing. Learning that the other side does not dehumanize and dislike you as much as you previously thought, and recognizing that you also have more in common on critical issues, creates the conditions for more effective engagement. These actions cannot be accomplished by any single organization and require collaboration and partnership between multiple entities at the local, state, and national levels. The four actions are:

1. Engage opinion leaders to stop the spread of polarizing narratives

We need to create resources that inform and educate opinion leaders in media, politics, faith, and culture about the dangers of toxic polarization. These should highlight where each of them may be able to play a constructive role in mitigating it. Although different segments of opinion leaders will require targeted resources and distinct types of engagement, there are fundamental principles that can be deployed across the political spectrum. For example, this could be done by working with media organizations to produce concrete guides for producers, journalists, and other professionals on preventing the spread of polarization.

2. Create awareness campaigns about partisan misperceptions

Increasing awareness about these divides can help to inoculate the American people against the negative effects of extreme partisan animosity. Taking action to reverse the negative impact of toxic polarization is within the **capacity of every American**. For instance, we can achieve this goal by creating a Citizen's Guide to Polarization, which lays out the information on how polarized psychology works, which can be disseminated by individuals, community groups, and non-partisan organizations.

3. Facilitate effective dialogue across the political spectrum

Political extremism is not new to America or other

democracies around the world. Once people find a common cause or engage with someone outside their group, they often find they have more in common than previously assumed. We also recommend drawing upon international experience. Other countries have gone through periods of intense polarization but managed to overcome it, and decades of global conflict resolution efforts suggest some key principles that can be translated and deployed in the US context, including tools for effective dialogue that can create conditions for change.

Learning that the other side does not dehumanize and dislike you as much as you previously thought creates the conditions for more effective engagement.

4. Systematically measure polarization over time

By examining the psychological factors contributing to polarization over time, we can better diagnose toxic polarization when and where it occurs, track changes, and use insights to further develop targeted tools for engagement.

While some of our research findings **are concerning**, they also provide reasons for **optimism**. We have an opportunity to take action and **disrupt** the false beliefs that Americans hold about each other—false beliefs that **create fear, distrust and hostility**. Now is the time to work together to create space for thoughtful discourse and civic engagement to address toxic polarization and its corrosive implications in 2020 and beyond.



Introduction

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS THAT DRIVE AMERICANS APART

Humans are fundamentally social animals. As such, our brain biology makes us very sensitive to feelings of group belonging, perceived threats of exclusion from groups, and external threats from members of other groups. We are attuned to this sense of belonging because our ability to form meaningful groups through strong social bonds enables us to survive. Strong social bonds offer protection, shared resources, and shared meaning in a chaotic world. Belonging to groups also gives us a sense of identity that defines who we are, what we value, and who we associate with. These identities are defined by shared history, language, symbols, appearance, and worldview.

In a country as large as the US, we share meaningful group identities with millions of people we will never meet. So how do we know who is a part of "Us" and who is a part of "Them"?

One way is through the common beliefs and values we share with other in-group members. Shared beliefs give us a lens through which to navigate and understand the world—but they can also signal our belonging to a particular group. Both functions are essential, but when intense intergroup conflict and animosity take hold, beliefs can begin to play an even

more important role as signals of belonging rather than as ways of interpreting our environment.⁴ This is a core element of a polarized psychology that dominates the American political landscape today.

A core feature of this polarized psychology is that it distorts the way the brain processes information about society. This happens through a series of cognitive biases or mental shortcuts we use to help us navigate the world. These biases often lead our brains to discount information that is inconsistent with our core beliefs and overly empathize with those in our own group at the expense of others. Polarized psychology can create a situation in which group identity shapes the way we see the world and can even lead us to see a different set of facts about the world that further divides us. We tend to discount this because we are often not consciously aware it is occurring.

A core feature of polarized psychology is that it distorts the way the brain processes information about society.

One of the most corrosive dimensions of polarized psychology has to do with negative and hostile beliefs about members of other groups. Once we

consider the other side as an enemy, we develop a range of negative perceptions and misperceptions about them and their intentions. We begin to believe that they cannot be reasoned with because they are motivated by irrational animosity toward us. We believe that they dislike us and dehumanize us, and that if we compromise some of our positions, they will immediately demand more. In turn, this leads us to further dislike and dehumanize them in a vicious cycle as they become more entrenched as our enemies. This cycle defines toxic polarization.

Once we define outside groups as the enemy, other extreme courses of political action become more likely as political norms are ignored. If enmity and threat are perceived to be large enough, the risk of violence increases. In fact, we have already seen political violence in the lead-up to the 2018 midterm elections in the form of violence against members of Congress, and bomb threats to media organizations and politicians. Extreme polarization within a society is one of the critical risk factors for political violence.⁵

The goal of this report is to introduce new insights from an innovative measurement tool, the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index™. The index was informed by brain and behavioral science and created to measure and track the degree of polarization and misperceptions that arise as a result of a polarized psychology. While the results may seem grim, the good news is that we are not as divided as a nation as we think. In addition, our thinking can change and evolve over time, and group identities are not permanent and rigid. In fact, history and decades of social psychology research show how readily we can form meaningful attachments to new groups.⁶ As a result, we can use our understanding of our brains and psychology (*how* we think, not *what* we think) to our advantage. By uncovering and confronting the factors that drive us apart, we can begin to address the toxic polarization that is endangering American democracy.

THE BEYOND CONFLICT POLARIZATION INDEX™

Inspired by recent advances in brain and behavioral science, we've spent the last 18 months gathering data to generate actionable insights using the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index™.^{7,8} We surveyed more than **3,000 Americans over a nine-month period**, ending in August 2019. Since the purpose of the index is to be both diagnostic and actionable, we focused on a set of questions that would serve both purposes. In the future, as we continue to collect more data, the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index™ will give us insights and analytics to design additional interventions, as well as an indication of whether polarized psychology is getting better or worse across the country.

For this first report, we looked at Americans' beliefs about the degree to which members of each of the two major political parties dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with the other.⁹ We then compared them to actual levels of dehumanization, dislike, and disagreement. Dehumanization and dislike are critical indicators of intergroup animosity, while disagreement on policy issues gives us a sense of people's beliefs in the possibility of compromise.

The divides between actual and perceived dehumanization, dislike, and disagreement are important and unique indicators of a polarized psychology because they: (a) represent what we think the other side believes; (b) inform us that our perceptions about the other side's views are often wrong; (c) can be used to track misperceptions on polarizing issues (e.g., immigration); and (d) can be corrected in a way that does not threaten group identity.

Tracking these misperceptions allows us to better understand the extent of our political and social divide and identify opportunities to take actions to reduce it and correct misunderstandings across the political spectrum.

Going Deeper on Polarized Psychology



Humans gravitate towards groups because they provide security and identity.

Humans are social animals. Our ability to form groups enables us to survive—it offers protection, resources, and meaning in a chaotic world.

Our brain uses shortcuts to decide who's in our group.

We use shared values, stories, symbols and language as signs of group belonging. They become particularly meaningful to us not just for their content, but as powerful indicators of identity.



Our brains are on the lookout for threats to the group. But in a polarized environment, we tend to blow them out of proportion.

As a defense mechanism, we often assume our own group has good intentions, and the other side must be malicious. This leads to exaggerated and hostile beliefs about members of other groups.



Once we view society primarily through this "Us vs. Them" lens it can make compromise and cooperation extremely difficult.

Once we consider the other side as an enemy, it induces a range of negative perceptions about them and their beliefs. We see them primarily as a threat.





Our Findings

Based on three surveys we ran from November 2018 through November 2019, we have identified a consistent pattern. There is a wide divide between perception and reality across key measures of the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index™. We have identified three psychological divides in which Americans hold significant misperceptions about one another. Americans incorrectly believe that members of the other party dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with them about twice as much as they actually do. The divide between actual and perceived dehumanization, dislike, and disagreement is correlated with outcomes that are consequential for democracy and represent a new degree of toxic polarization in America. In short, **Americans believe we're more polarized than we really are—and that misperception can drive us even further apart.**

In general, Republicans and Democrats who tend to overestimate the degree of dehumanization, dislike, and disagreement are more likely to support putting party over country. They also report lower levels of trust in the country's civic institutions, such as local and state government or the Supreme Court. While these results may seem bleak, they offer reasons for optimism and opportunities to close the divide between actual and perceived enmity. Below we present key findings from the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index™, centering on three psychological divides and their consequences for American democracy.

We have identified three psychological divides: dehumanization, dislike, and disagreement, in which Americans hold significant misperceptions about one another.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DIVIDE #1: DEHUMANIZATION

Dehumanization is the act of seeing other people as less than human. It is a dangerous psychological process and a strong indicator of potential hostility between groups. Dehumanizing rhetoric has accompanied some of the worst atrocities in human history and is thought to be an early indicator of discrimination and future violence.

Violence can also emerge when dehumanization leads to rationalizing harm against a particular group.¹⁰ Political rhetoric that is dehumanizing is commonly expressed by comparing members of the other party to animals. These animals can be members of an unthinking herd (e.g., sheep) or animals that can display both stupidity and aggression (e.g., dogs). Other animal comparisons are more threatening

because of their capacity for physical violence (e.g., sharks), or animals that are threatening because they can contaminate and carry disease (e.g., cockroaches or vermin).¹¹

Beyond Conflict scientists have been tracking dehumanization across nearly a dozen countries over the last several years. We have found that it is a risk factor for intergroup aggression and hostility between identity groups.¹² For instance, we have found high levels of dehumanization between Israelis and Palestinians during the 2014 Gaza War and between Colombians and the FARC guerrilla group.^{13¹⁴} We also found that dehumanization was strongly correlated with support for draconian policies against marginalized groups such as the Roma throughout Europe and immigrants in the US.¹⁵ These instances represent cases of serious systematic discrimination and protracted real and potential violence between groups. While levels of dehumanization between Republicans and Democrats do not reach the levels of these examples, the levels we found are concerning.

What's even more concerning than the high levels of dehumanization are the levels of perceived dehumanization. Perceived dehumanization (sometimes called meta-dehumanization) refers to the degree to which we feel dehumanized by members of an opposing group. To measure perceived dehumanization within the US political context, we asked Democrats and Republicans to rate how dehumanized they feel by members of the other party.

We found that the levels of perceived dehumanization are more than twice as large as levels of actual dehumanization, creating a large Dehumanization Divide. While one may think that this is confined to the most extreme partisans among us, it is actually common. In our nationally representative sample, 79% of Democrats overestimated how much Republicans actually dehumanize them, while 82% of Republicans overestimated how much Democrats actually dehumanize them.¹⁶

Actual Dehumanization

To measure actual dehumanization between political parties, we asked Republicans and Democrats how evolved they considered the other party to be. Respondents used a scale simulating the evolution of humans (often referred to as the Ascent of Man diagram). On this scale, a score of a 100 represents fully human (an image of Homo sapiens) and a score of 0 represents fully less than human (an image of an early primate). Using this scale we find that Democrats give Republicans a median score of 83 out of 100, while Republicans give Democrats a median score of 80 out of 100 (see Figure 1). This suggests a moderate level of dehumanization, since Republicans and Democrats normally rate their own groups in the mid or upper 90s on this scale.¹⁷

The levels of perceived dehumanization are more than twice as large as levels of actual dehumanization, creating a large Dehumanization Divide.

Perceived Dehumanization

We also measured levels of perceived dehumanization. Perceived dehumanization refers to the feeling of being dehumanized by the other group. This has the potential to create a vicious cycle that can lead to increased intergroup hostility: when we think that members of the other party dehumanize us, we are likelier to dehumanize them.¹⁸

We measure perceived dehumanization by asking Democrats and Republicans to guess how evolved members of the other party consider them to be on the same scale. Thus, Democrats are estimating how much Republicans dehumanize Democrats, while Republicans are estimating how much Democrats dehumanize Republicans. **The results are alarming.**

Republicans and Democrats believe that members of the other party dehumanize them more than twice as much as they actually do. Specifically, Republicans estimate that Democrats rate them at a score of 28 out of 100 (in reality Democrats rated them at an 83). Similarly, Democrats estimate that Republicans rate them at 48 points out of 100 (in reality Republicans rated them at an 80).

The Dehumanization Divide

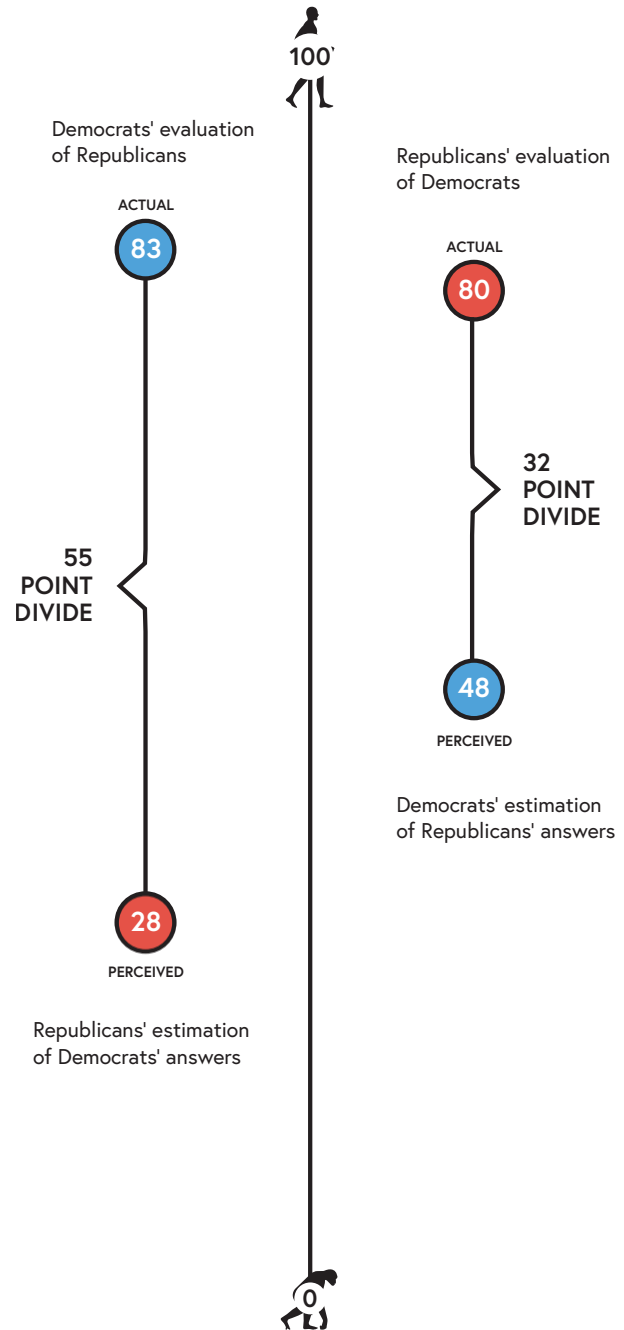
The difference between actual levels of dehumanization and perceived levels of dehumanization is expressed as the Dehumanization Divide. This divide is significant and alarming—but most important, **it's something we can act to change**. Republicans and Democrats feel dehumanized by members of the other party at high levels, while the actual levels of dehumanization are much lower. Republicans believe that Democrats dehumanize them 55 points more than they actually do, while Democrats believe that Republicans dehumanize them 32 points more than they actually do.

A large Dehumanization Divide is harmful to American democracy because it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

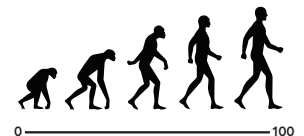
DEHUMANIZATION DIVIDE

Figure 1

Beyond Conflict asked Democrats and Republicans to rate how 'evolved' members of the other party were. Then we asked what they think the other side would say about them.



Scale of the Ascent of Man. Democrats and Republicans used this scale to rate how "evolved" the other party was.



Going Deeper on Dehumanization

Dehumanization is the psychological process of perceiving others as less than human.

Part of toxic polarization is the use of political rhetoric and demeaning language that can lead to animosity between groups.

Hearing this rhetoric repeated leads us to assume that many in the other group dehumanize us as well.

We then overestimate the degree of dehumanization that the group holds toward us.



Meanwhile, those in the group hear the same message but interpret it less maliciously.

This creates a gap between the perceptions of members of the group using the dehumanizing rhetoric and those in the other group hearing it.



The feeling of being dehumanized leads us to dehumanize the other side in return, often with more malice.

This starts a vicious cycle that feeds toxic polarization that can be difficult to break.



PSYCHOLOGICAL DIVIDE #2: DISLIKE

The most common feature of polarized psychology is strong feelings of dislike toward members of the other party. Often referred to as affective polarization, this kind of dislike has been measured since the 1980s. While there is some evidence that levels of dislike have become more stable in recent years, overall dislike has increased over time.^{19/20}

Dislike is aimed not at the opinions of members of a group, but rather at the group itself.²¹ In other words, it refers to how much we dislike the other group not only because of what they believe, but also because of their identity. Dislike is typically measured using a "feeling thermometer," which asks how coldly or warmly one feels toward a particular group—0 being very cold and 100 being very warm. We used a similar scale.²²

The feeling of being disliked by the other party is a powerful force. Overestimating how much the other party dislikes your party is predictive of higher levels of social distance (e.g., feeling uncomfortable with members of the other party serving as your doctor, being your child's teacher, or marrying one of your children).²³ At the extreme, misperceptions about dislike can lead to higher levels of support for putting your party's interests above the country's in a way that undermines democratic norms.

We may wish to believe that this pattern is confined to only the most extreme, fringe members of each party, but we have found that it is widespread. According to our nationally representative sample, 82% of Democrats overestimate how much Republicans actually dislike them, and 82% of Republicans overestimate how much Democrats actually dislike them.²⁴

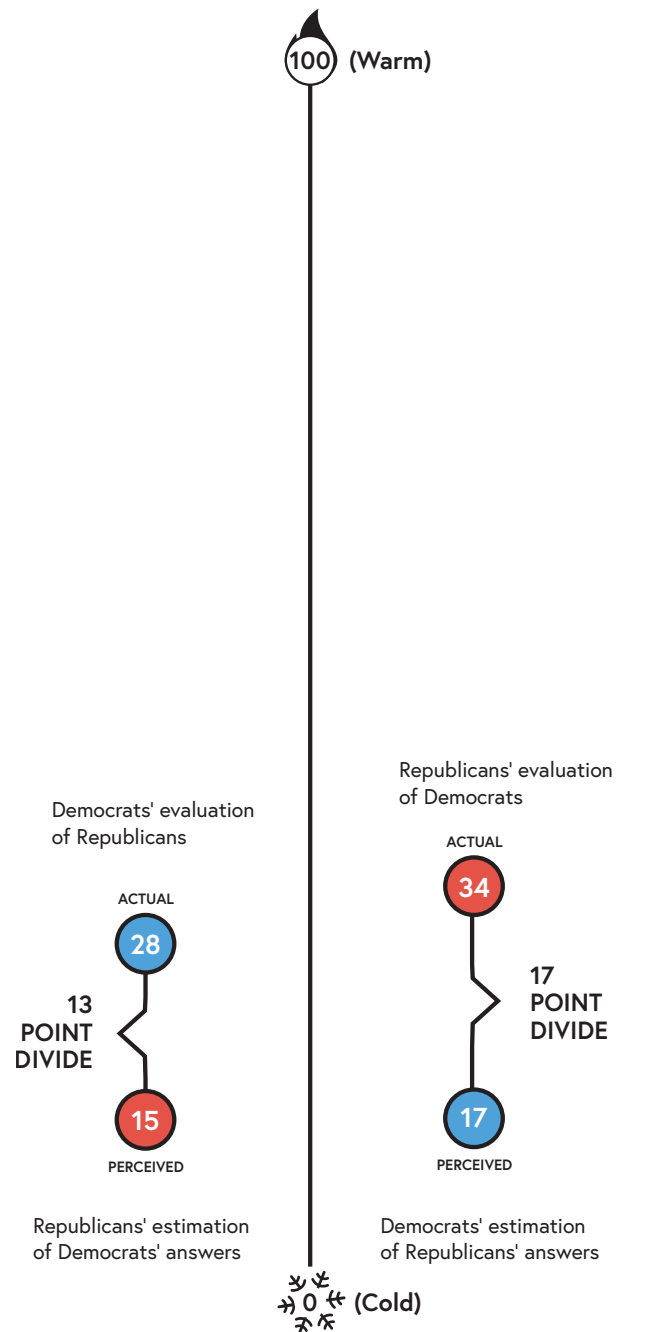
Actual Dislike

Our research is consistent with other studies that show that Republicans and Democrats like members

DISLIKE DIVIDE

Figure 2

Beyond Conflict asked Democrats and Republicans to rate how warm or cold they feel toward the other side. Then we asked them how they think the other side feels toward them.



Feeling Thermometer.

Democrats and Republicans used this scale to rate how warm or cold they feel toward the other side.



of their own party but strongly dislike members of the other party. When asked how cold (0) or warm (100) they feel about the other party, Republicans give Democrats a score of approximately 34 out of 100, while Democrats give Republicans a score of 28 out of 100. These levels of dislike are strong and widespread. Republicans and Democrats, on average, rate members of their own party around 75 on the feeling thermometer.²⁵ Levels of actual dislike are represented in Figure 2.

Perceived Dislike

The feeling of being disliked can be powerful in disrupting intergroup relations. If you feel that the other party dislikes your own party because of who you are, then you are more likely to dislike them in return. Perceived dislike could be interpreted as a threat to one's group. Similar to perceived dehumanization, perceived dislike is also exaggerated among Americans based on party affiliation. Since levels of dislike are already quite high, it is noteworthy that **Republicans and Democrats both feel that the other side dislikes them nearly twice as much as they actually do.** Democrats believe Republicans rate them at 17 points out of 100, while Republicans believe Democrats rate them at 15 points out of 100.

The Dislike Divide

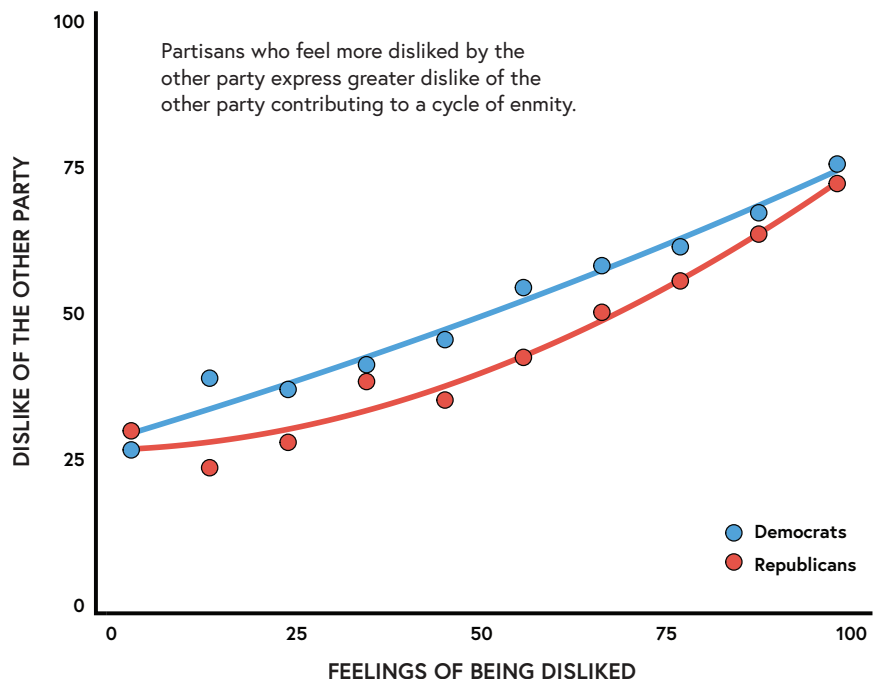
The difference between actual levels of dislike and perceived levels of dislike is expressed as the Dislike Divide. Like the Dehumanization Divide, the Dislike Divide is significant and **can be addressed.** This divide shows that Americans

believe partisan animosity is substantially greater than it actually is. Democrats believe Republicans' feelings of dislike toward them are 17 points lower than they really are, while Republicans believe that Democrats' feelings toward them are 13 points lower than they really are.

Like the Dehumanization Divide, the Dislike Divide can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we think the other side intensely dislikes us not because of what we believe but because of who we are, then we are more likely to intensify our own dislike of them in return, creating a vicious cycle of enmity. But if we can correct the false perception of what we believe the other side thinks, then we can reduce toxic polarization. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between actual and perceived dislike.

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ACTUAL AND PERCEIVED DISLIKE

Figure 3



0 = low levels of dislike and perceived dislike;
100 = high levels of dislike and perceived dislike

PSYCHOLOGICAL DIVIDE #3: DISAGREEMENT ON KEY ISSUES

We also measured partisan disagreement on two controversial policy issues that have been dominating the national discourse for the past several years: **immigration and gun control**. Misperceptions on the levels of disagreement on these key issues also have enormous practical consequences for the country since they are deeply tied to partisan identities. In other words, these issues have become core defining topics for each party not just on a policy level but also on an identity level.

We found that dehumanization and dislike are not the only dimensions by which Americans overestimate what the other side believes. Americans also exaggerate the extent of partisan disagreement on policy issues. **When looking at immigration and gun control, for instance, Americans are simply not as divided as they think.** Given the amount of media coverage and attention that these two issues have received recently, it is noteworthy how much Americans underestimate how much they agree with each other.

Immigration

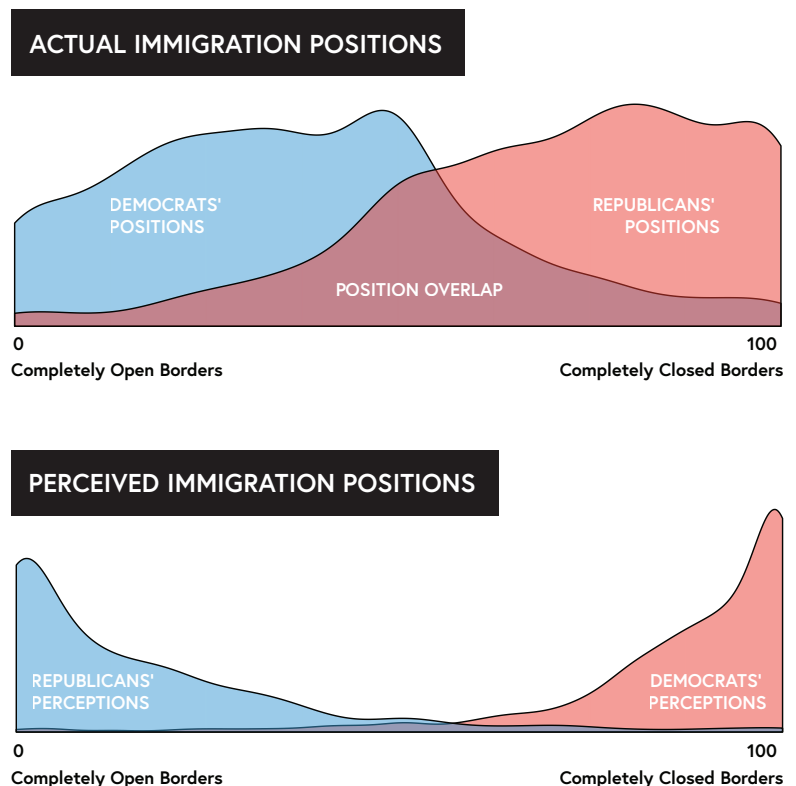
We asked members of each party to rate their own views on immigration. We did not ask about specific policies, but rather about general preference for closed or open borders, noting that many people are not in either extreme. In our survey, 0 means keeping all borders completely open to all migrants and 100 means keeping all borders completely closed to all migrants. We also asked them to estimate how the average member of the other party would answer the same question.

In our samples, Democrats had a median score of 35, but Republicans estimated that Democrats would have a median score of 9—a difference of 26 points. Republicans had a median score of 75, while Democrats estimated Republicans would have a median score of 92—a difference of 17 points. Figure 4 shows the summary statistics of Republicans' and Democrats' responses to questions about immigration.

In short, based on our survey, **Republicans and Democrats believe the extent of their disagreement on immigration is far greater than it actually is.** Figure 4 below highlights actual partisan disagreement about open vs. closed borders based on our survey responses and compares them with perceived partisan disagreement about open vs. closed borders. As Figure 4 illustrates, perceived disagreement between Republicans and Democrats on immigration

ACTUAL VS. PERCEIVED DISAGREEMENT ON IMMIGRATION

Figure 4



is substantial, and strikingly, the distribution of responses essentially hollows out the middle. In other words, Republicans and Democrats perceive the other side's views to be extreme to the point of eliminating the shared space for potential compromise. If one side believes the other side to be far away on the issues it reduces the likelihood of constructive dialogue on the topic.

Gun Control

We created a similar measurement scale for gun control, asking respondents for their views about gun control and the Second Amendment. In our survey, 0 means repealing the Second Amendment and outlawing guns, and 100 means enforcing no restrictions on gun ownership.²⁶ In our question, we noted that many people fall between these two extremes, which is what we found. We then asked respondents to rate how they think the average Republican or the average Democrat would answer the same question about gun control.

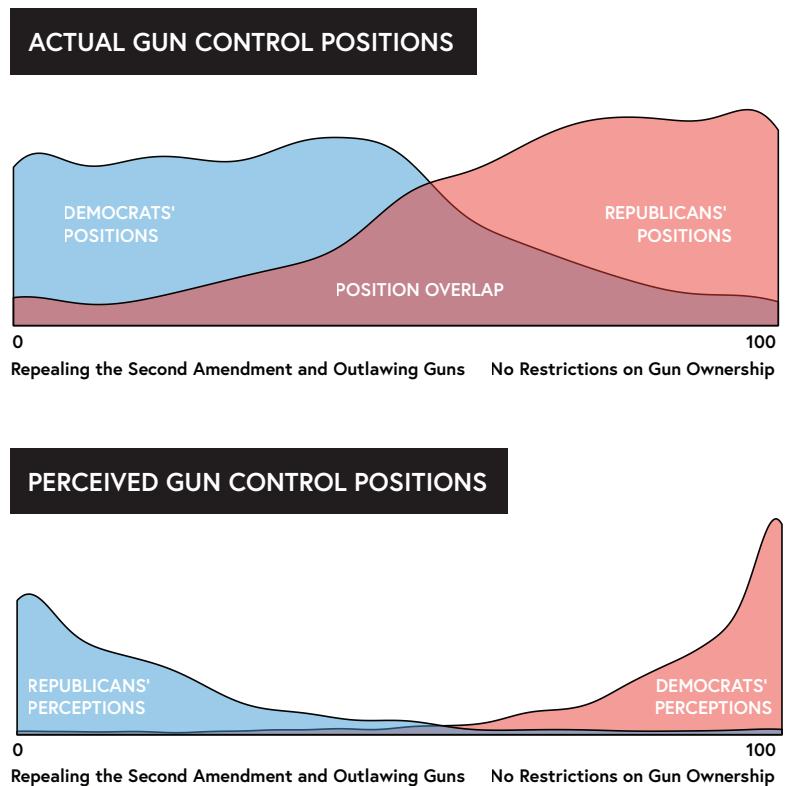
The pattern was similar to immigration. **Members of both parties believe the extent of their disagreement on gun control is greater than it actually is.** Republicans estimated that Democrats would place themselves at 11 points away from a complete repeal of the Second Amendment and the banning of all guns. In reality, Democrats were actually closer to the middle of the spectrum, at a median score of 35—a difference of 24 points. Democrats estimated that Republicans would be at a median score of 94, which is 6 points away from no restrictions on gun ownership at all. Republicans were also closer to the middle of the spectrum, at a

median score of 74—a difference of 20 points (see Figure 5).

This is both a cause for concern and a cause for hope. It is concerning because both Republicans and Democrats hold significant misperceptions about the policy views of their fellow Americans, providing a critical indicator that polarized psychology is distorting Americans' perceptions of one another. **This is a pattern that has been found on a range of other issues, but despite these perceptions, Americans are not as divided as they believe, which gives us hope that there is room for compromise on vital policy issues.**²⁷

ACTUAL VS. PERCEIVED DISAGREEMENT ON GUN CONTROL

Figure 5



Going Deeper on Disagreement

Polarized psychology is a lens that distorts our view of the other side.

We think we're further apart on the issues than we actually are, so we assume compromise would require giving up more than we're comfortable with.



But surveys show that Democrats and Republicans are closer on key issues than they think they are.

Once we realize this, compromise is less threatening, because it means the middle ground is closer than we think.

To bridge this divide, we don't have to start by giving up our beliefs, we just need to realize we're closer than we thought.



THE CONSEQUENCES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DIVIDES

Party Over Country

One damaging consequence of toxic polarization is the willingness to place the interests of one's party above the interests of the country. This has profound implications for the health of a democracy. We asked Democrats and Republicans a series of questions about their willingness to prioritize the interests of their own party, even if it was at the expense of the country. The positive news is that **majorities of both Democrats and Republicans oppose putting partisan interest above the interests of the country.** Nevertheless, there are still significant portions of both parties that support putting party over country.

- 60% of Democrats oppose the proposition that the Democratic Party should do everything it can to (1) hurt the other party at the expense of the country, and (2) make it difficult for the other party to run the government; 28% of Democrats surveyed support this idea.

- 65% of Republicans oppose the proposition that the Republican Party should do everything it can to (1) hurt the other party at the expense of the country, and (2) make it difficult for the other party to run the government; 23% of Republicans surveyed support this idea.

We found that Democrats and Republicans who hold greater misperceptions about the extent to which members of the other

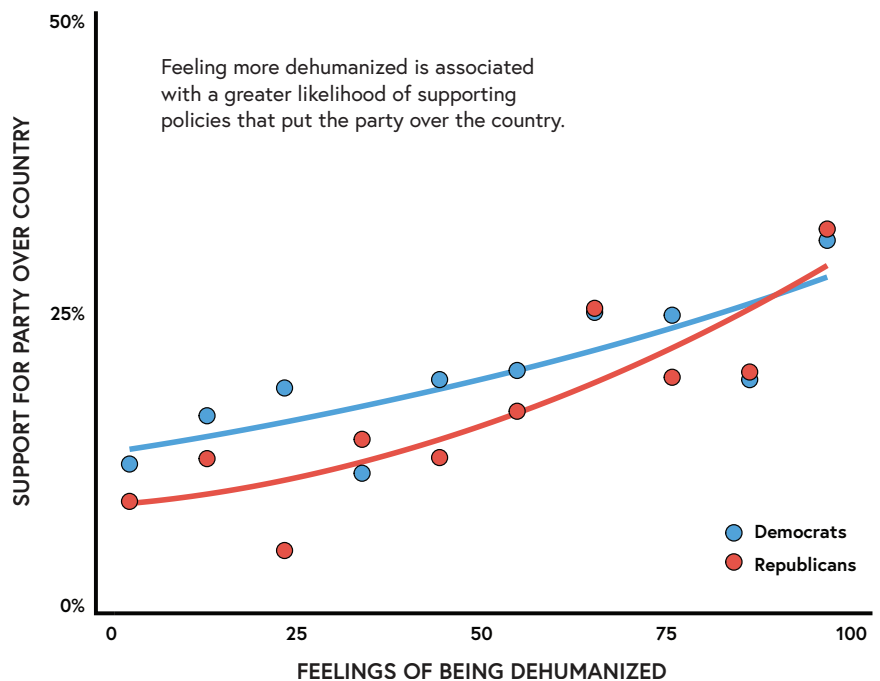
party dislike and dehumanize them are more likely to agree that it is acceptable to harm the other party, even at the expense of the country. They are also more likely to express greater discomfort with social interactions with members of the other party, such as their doctor being a member of the other party. In other words, the more one feels dehumanized and disliked by the other party, the likelier one is to endorse views that are ultimately harmful to American democracy.²⁸ Figure 6 highlights the relationship between perceived dehumanization by members of the other party and support for political action that puts party over country.

Trust in Institutions

We also asked questions about trust in critical civic institutions, in particular, state and local government, federal law enforcement, Congress, and the Supreme Court.²⁹ Civic institutions help foster a nation's common identity, and the public's trust in civic institutions.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED DEHUMANIZATION AND SUPPORT FOR PUTTING PARTY OVER COUNTRY

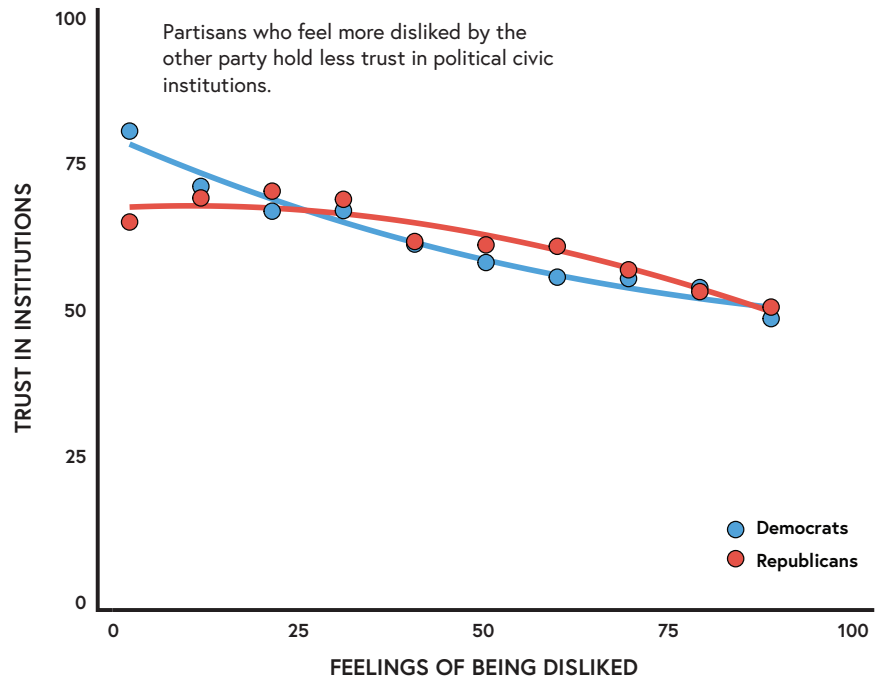
Figure 6



Trust is an important indicator of democratic health. Lower levels of trust in institutions of government may undermine the legitimacy of their decisions in the eyes of the public. We asked respondents whether they have a lot of trust (100) or no trust (0) in several institutions. Using an aggregated score, we found that **feeling disliked by members of the other party is correlated with reduced trust in civic institutions for members of both parties.** This is important because it links levels of perceived dislike with an outcome that, as a number of observers have recently argued, is explicitly detrimental to American democracy (see Figure 7).³⁰ Our findings highlight an empirical link between polarized psychology and lack of trust in institutions.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AND PERCEIVED DISLIKE

Figure 7



0=no trust; 100=a lot of trust

0=low perceived dislike; 100=high perceived dislike



Summary

TOXIC POLARIZATION IS A THREAT TO AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Political polarization, when left unchecked, poses a serious threat to American democracy.³¹ While substantive disagreements over ideology and policy can be a healthy and essential part of any democracy, for instance, by encouraging activism toward reform, extreme polarization can lead to real challenges.³² In extreme cases, political polarization can undermine the legitimacy of democratic norms and institutions, increase the risk of political violence, and ultimately unravel a country's social fabric.³³ Toxic polarization occurs when polarization moves beyond disagreement and becomes primarily about identity. This is more likely to happen when the many identities that are a part of a diverse American society (such as racial, ethnic, and religious identities) are aggregated into one central fault line: Republican vs. Democrat.³⁴

Recently, the identities tied to these party affiliations have come to define Americans' worldviews in ways that extend beyond politics and dominate everyday life. Political and social conflict in the US is now largely, though not exclusively, defined by tensions between these two identities.³⁵

When the leaders and members of one group are perceived by the other group as a profound threat to the country, we begin to believe that the other

side is willing to abuse existing institutions in order to advance their interests at our expense. This calls into question the legitimacy of the shared institutions and norms that sustain a democracy.³⁶ If we begin to believe that the other side is so extreme that any interaction with members of the other party is hopeless at best, and damaging at worst, then the likelihood of cooperation on critical issues is substantially reduced. If we believe that the other side poses a significant threat to our core values and interests not because of what they believe but because of who they are, then the likelihood of political violence grows, particularly when previously commonly accepted norms are ignored.³⁷ The result is a form of toxic polarization that can damage American democracy.

This division leads many to view politics and society with an "Us vs. Them" lens. Once Americans begin to believe that their party's loss is the other party's gain it becomes a zero-sum game, feeding a pattern of mutual hostility that can be difficult to break. This pattern, if left unchecked, can become the dominant framework through which we view the world, corroding the shared beliefs and norms that are critical to democracy.³⁸ It also fundamentally distorts Americans' perceptions of one another's intentions and views. History shows that deeply polarized psychology serves as a warning sign that something is wrong and must be fixed.³⁹ Americans must confront the psychology of what drives us apart now.

Recommendations for Action



Initial insights from the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index™ reveal how polarized psychology poses a risk to democracy and highlights opportunities to take action and confront the psychological factors that drive us apart. By examining the psychological factors contributing to polarization, we can use the insights to develop and evaluate the impact of targeted strategies and tools.

Democrats' and Republicans' substantial misperceptions about one another is both a warning sign to Americans and an opportunity to confront these psychological forces and take steps to change course. As we continue to systematically track and map the psychology of polarization, we can also take concrete actions to reduce partisan animosity.

Beyond Conflict recommends four concrete action items to help address toxic polarization. While Beyond Conflict is taking steps to follow through on these recommendations, they cannot be implemented in isolation; rather, they require a coordinated, collaborative effort across multiple organizations and individuals.

1. Create Awareness Campaigns About Partisan Misperceptions

Focusing on polarized psychology—especially the key dynamics of dehumanization, dislike, and disagreement and the distortions they create in our perceptions—reveals opportunities for action. Studies have shown

that the act of educating and informing the public can help correct partisan misperceptions in and of itself.⁴⁰ Americans can realize that they dislike each other less and agree with each other more than they currently believe. This realization can help encourage people to get out of their own information bubbles and engage with people from the other side. Research from the Harvard Kennedy School indicates that Americans anticipate how unpleasant interacting with the other group would be, and therefore avoid it.⁴¹ Erroneous misperceptions likely contribute to this avoidance, deterring people from interacting with people they mistakenly believe severely dehumanize them, dislike them, and disagree with them.

The right intervention for these common misperceptions will help to inoculate the American people against the negative effects of partisan animosity. Taking action to reverse the negative trend of enmity and polarization is within the capacity of every American. As a first step, Beyond Conflict plans to develop and test a Citizen's Guide to Polarization starting in the spring of 2020, and we anticipate launching other related interventions with additional resources.

2. Engage Opinion Leaders to Stop the Spread of Polarizing Narratives

Those who have the platform and ability to help shape the American discourse are either unaware or complicit in exacerbating polarized psychology and must alter their behavior. This requires a fundamental

realignment of coverage priorities, political mobilization strategies and tactics, and a deeper understanding of the challenge toxic polarization poses to those who shape the information ecosystems of the United States. While this will be difficult to achieve considering the business models of certain organizations depend on this type of coverage, there are still things that can be done. A first step would be to create resources that inform and educate opinion leaders in media, politics, faith, and culture about the dangers of toxic polarization, highlighting where they may be able to play a constructive role in mitigating it.⁴²

Although different segments of opinion leaders will require distinct resources and types of engagement, there are fundamental common principles that could be deployed. For example, unless there is compelling evidence, narratives that emphasize the malicious intentions of a particular party likely contribute to partisan misperceptions. These types of narratives can also be manipulated by others who could misuse them to highlight a sense of threat, emphasizing how much "They" hate "Us." Narratives that homogenize large identity groups and attribute questionable motives to the whole group should be avoided. While this type of framing is economical and simple to understand, it implies that all Democrats and Republicans think in the same way, which likely contributes to misperceptions, and flattens nuance and complexity.

As a first step, Beyond Conflict plans to co-create a guide for media professionals and journalists, providing resources and information on polarized psychology and how they can tell powerful stories without exacerbating the divide. Such a guide could be replicated with other opinion leaders in politics, culture, and faith.

3. Encourage Effective Dialogue Across the Political Spectrum

Over the past several years many dialogue organizations that encourage interaction across partisan lines have emerged. While it may sound trite,

getting to know one's neighbors and fellow community members can help correct the misperceptions that prevent us from initiating contact with the so-called "other side" in the first place. In fact, upcoming research from Beyond Conflict and the University of Pennsylvania suggests that intergroup contact—interacting with members of a different group—meaningfully reduces dehumanization and perceived dehumanization.⁴³ Additional research by Beyond Conflict and Harvard University has shown that cooperation across party lines can reduce levels of partisan animosity and misperceptions.⁴⁴ Once we begin talking with someone outside our group, we often find out we have more in common than previously assumed, especially if that person lives in the same community.

We also recommend drawing on international experience. Other countries have gone through periods of intense polarization and have managed to overcome it. Beyond Conflict's historic work in global conflict resolution suggests some key principles of dialogue across group lines that can be translated and deployed in the US context. Beyond Conflict is in the process of distilling insights from its nearly three decades of work supporting leaders around the world in resolving intractable conflicts into a Toolkit for Effective Dialogue.

4. Systematically Measure the Psychological Factors that Drive us Apart

We should be systematically tracking the psychological factors that are driving us apart, sharing those results with the American public, and using them to design strategies for addressing toxic polarization at scale. By examining the psychological factors contributing to polarization, we can better diagnose toxic polarization when and where it occurs, analyze change over time, and use the insights to develop and evaluate the impact of targeted strategies and tools. With additional resources and appropriate partnerships, we can also track polarized psychology at the national, regional, and local levels, allowing us to account for variation by geography.



Conclusion

America faces profound challenges that are largely unaddressed, partly due to rising sentiments of mutual animosity between Democrats and Republicans. Our research indicates that the country is not as divided as it seems and that Americans are ideologically closer to one another than they believe. It is clear that untruths about the intentions and beliefs of political parties may be undermining our democracy.

Americans can take steps to remedy these misperceptions by focusing on the truth about each other as fellow citizens. We hope that this report provides an initial roadmap for action. Americans must recognize that while we may fundamentally disagree about important issues, reducing misperceptions about political polarization does not require abandoning one's values, core identity, party affiliation, or support for one particular candidate over another. The first step is to break the cycle of misperceptions that lead Americans

to believe that they are more divided than they actually are and to create tools that allow us to focus on national interests over party identity. By improving our understanding of what members of the other party think and feel, we can mitigate and reduce the risk toxic polarization poses to American democracy.

In order to effectively address polarization, we must develop the ability to measure, diagnose, understand, and address the dynamics of a polarized psychology. The Beyond Conflict Polarization Index™ systematically tracks polarized psychology and produces actionable insights that citizens, opinion leaders, and civic organizations can translate into programs for change. An evidence-based understanding of the psychology of partisan animosity in the US demands action in the lead-up to the 2020 elections and beyond.



Subscribe to receive the latest news about the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index: beyondconflictint.org/subscribe

Endnotes

1. The definition of "polarization" is sometimes contested, with some referring to ideological disagreement about issues and some interested in intergroup polarization. For this report we were interested in the latter, further unpacking what is commonly called "affective polarization," which refers to strong favoritism toward one's own party and dislike toward the other party. In particular, we focused on how group members make inferences about issues and about each other. We use the terms "polarization" and "partisanship" interchangeably in this report. For more on polarization, see: McCarty, N. M. (2019). *Polarization: What everyone needs to know*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
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8. For the academic version of some of the results, please see: Moore-Berg, S.L., Ankori-Karlinsky, L., Hameiri, B., & Bruneau, E. (2020). Exaggerated Meta-Perceptions Predict Intergroup Hostility Between American Political Partisans. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/d6bpe>
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17. In other cases, dehumanization levels are measured by comparing in-group dehumanization with out-group dehumanization. For clarity,

- we do not do so in this report. However, dehumanization levels between Republicans and Democrats are statistically significant as reported in: Moore-Berg, S.L., Ankori-Karlinsky, L., Hameiri, B., & Bruneau, E. (2020). Exaggerated Meta-Perceptions Predict Intergroup Hostility Between American Political Partisans. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/d6bpe>
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Methodology

Our first survey was completed by a nationally representative sample of 1,256 Americans, recruited through the non-partisan research organization NORC at the University of Chicago. From the original sample, 212 participants failed an attention-check question, resulting in a final sample of 1,053 participants (51% Democrat, 49% Republican). The survey was fielded in August 2019.

Our second group consisted of a longitudinal Amazon Mechanical Turk sample with two waves. Wave 1 included 2,707 participants (58% Democrat, 42% Republican). Of the 2,707 Wave 1 participants, 1909 participants completed Wave 2. Wave 1 was fielded in November 2018, and Wave 2 was fielded in January 2019. To avoid redundancy, we report here data from Wave 2 only. See preprint for full results.

The data visualizations and numbers provided here include the respondents from Wave 2 of the Amazon Mechanical Turk study and the nationally representative sample from NORC.



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