

AUTHORITARIANISM

Understanding the Psychological Underpinnings of Democracy:
Actualizing Evidence-Based Solutions to Strengthen Democracy

The rising trend of authoritarianism in recent decades is matched by a declining trend of autocrats claiming power through military coups and blatant election fraud. The most recent cases of democratic breakdown are not the result of hostile takeovers but, rather, the endline result of elected leaders pursuing the steady erosion of democratic functioning. The U.S. is not exempt from the global pattern-- the [Democracy Threat Index](#) currently assigns a threat score of 42* to the US, up from a 2017 threat score of 27, signifying substantial erosion of democratic quality, with warnings of high potential for future breakdown. Reflective of this degradation of democracy are high levels of extreme political polarization, which interfere with the ability to forge political compromise as a result of perceived threat, motive misattribution, meta-misperceptions (particularly in regards to values), and collective blame. These dynamics have a corrosive impact on national capacities to solve consequential collective problems and actualize both electoral and liberal democratic ideals. Still, we tend to misdiagnose drivers and symptoms of democratic decline, [overestimating the role of mass polarization](#) and underestimating that of social identity and identity-based conflict.

Democracies around the world purport to center democratic norms as their north star and, accordingly, attempt to structure and strengthen institutions to ensure compliance with those norms. Collective adherence to these democratic principles is primarily influenced by three factors: (i) situation and context; (ii) law and policy; and (iii) socio-cultural norms. Historically, research has focused on the first two to the detriment of better understanding *how* socio-cultural norms inform adherence to democratic norms--or not. While the norms themselves may be enshrined in law, it is essential to also consider the psychological orientations that are necessary for a thriving system of democratic governance. These include, (1) [political tolerance](#) or a willingness to tolerate diverse political views, which correlates with the extent to which democratic norms are internalized and/or fused with social identities; (2) [willingness to support equal protections of civil liberties across all identity groups](#), which does not necessarily correlate to levels of political tolerance but does correlate with levels of perceived identity threat; and, (3) [citizen interest in participating in governance](#), which is tied to interpersonal trust, trust in public institutions, norms of reciprocity, and membership in voluntary associations.

To illustrate the point, one can focus on the U.S. as a case example. When attempting to explain democratic decline, [claims are often made](#) that partisans no longer hold democratic norms as important. But, Beyond Conflict's research finds that both [Democrats and Republicans highly value core democratic norms](#) but severely underestimate opposing party members' support for those same values. These misperceptions correlate to [support for anti-democratic practice](#)--meaning, they help groups justify the violation of civil and political rights in relation to the outgroup (opposing group), which they believe to hold inferior values. This perceived threat to core values manifests as a form of social identity threat. When a group perceives itself to be under threat, there is a greater tendency to assume the outgroup dislikes or dehumanizes your in-group. Threat also impacts the processing of information and the salience of identity. Oxytocin levels increase during inter-group conflict and that, in turn, increases affiliation with ingroup members (i.e., a greater feeling of love and empathy among a group and the desire to seek revenge when attacked by an outside group). What follows is a decreased

* This is on a scale of 0-100, where "0" signifies a healthy democracy and "100" denotes the absence of democracy.

willingness to challenge norms of the ingroup, even if some ingroup members might view those norms as problematic--the threat environment does not allow for the safer space required to challenge ingroup social norms.

Importantly, these are fundamentally human--not partisan--dynamics, meaning they can be observed among both liberals and conservatives. [Outgroup threat perception is a stronger predictor of support for undemocratic practice than party affiliation.](#) Still, on both sides, politicians and political parties exploit these perceptions to win elections and capture political power. Political rhetoric often strokes victimhood narratives and exacerbates the perceived identity threats stoked daily by the media. This heightened threat perception can contribute to some voters electing politicians who hold more extreme views and positions. Combined with the ingroup/outgroup dynamics identified above, a trend of some--though, importantly, not all--politicians increasingly identifying themselves with particular ingroups instead of with integrated communities emerges. This, in turn:

- Limits social capital construction and decreases social trust, which reduces community resilience;
- Curtails the mobilization potential of social movements, which rely on the ability to mobilize outside of their ingroups to sustain their efforts for change;
- Hinders the efficacy of social movements in applying pressure on politicians when those movements are perceived as outgroups; and,
- Exacerbates information echo chambers, denying us a shared basis in fact.

The result is a democratic culture defined by the politics of opposition instead of cooperation. There is an urgent need to better understand the psychology of what drives groups apart and to translate an emerging body of academic research on topics including identity threat, sacred values, and affective polarization into actionable evidence-based solutions to increase inclusive democratic practice.

Beyond Conflict is a global nonprofit organization that combines decades of practice with brain and behavioral science to strengthen democracy and peacebuilding efforts globally. Leveraging our experience facilitating conflict resolution and democratic renewal around the world, Beyond Conflict's Democracy and Social Identity program is spearheading an innovative initiative, Understanding the Psychological Underpinnings of a Democracy, that articulates a framework for democracy strengthening initiatives that translate scientific insights for use in programming, policy, and philanthropy. Our approach and ensuing interventions are developed in partnership with leading scientists, practitioners, academics, senior policymakers, and affected communities. The science-informed interventions suggested by this framework are applicable globally, when contextualized. The focus on psychological drivers can assist in disaggregating the need to focus programming on democratic norms, social identity threat, social trust, and/or trust in public institutions. Whether informing media campaigns, civil society development, or civic engagement programming, Beyond Conflict's research and tested interventions confirm the science offers another lens through which to analyze the problem, question assumptions underlying each theory of change, and devise solutions more likely to yield measurable impact.



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Michelle Barsa

Program Director, Democracy & Social Identity

mbarsa@beyondconflict.org | (917) 334-4646

EXPLORE OUR WORK:



www.beyondconflictint.org



Beyond Conflict



[@beyond_conflict](https://twitter.com/beyond_conflict)

Beyond Conflict is an international, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization on a mission to understand and address the root causes and consequences of conflict. Beyond Conflict combines insights from brain and behavioral science with nearly 30 years of experience in conflict resolution to advance new strategies to prevent violence and promote peace.

Beyond Conflict is an independent, tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) organization under the Internal Revenue Code.