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17. Political stereotypes and affective polarization

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INTRODUCTION

Political stereotypes are beliefs regarding the attributes of politically defined groups. For instance, we might believe Green voters to be young and live in cities, associate right-wingers with eating meat, and picture radical right supporters as lower-educated men. Such beliefs are arguably omnipresent in any democracy and are not necessarily without any ground: these various political and non-political attributes might indeed generally go together. At the same time, stereotypes are often distorted and sometimes outright wrong (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996; Bordalo et al., 2016; Fernbach & Van Boven, 2022). Worse, as testified by the literature on ethnic, gender, and other divisions, stereotypes have the potential to reinforce intergroup conflict (Schwartz & Struch, 1989; Correll et al., 2002; Portman, 2022; Dovidio et al., 2010). The mental images we have of our political opponents – or our own camp – matter for how we *feel about* either group. This makes stereotypes an important, if complex, part of the study of affective polarization.

This chapter will explore the relationship between political stereotypes and affective polarization. While the two are likely closely related, stereotypes have received surprisingly scarce empirical scrutiny in research on affective polarization. Neither is there consensus on a theoretical framework that links the two concepts. This chapter does not claim to present such an overarching framework but rather proposes some directions for theorizing and studying the relationship between political stereotypes and affective polarization. It aims to take stock of the (scarce) work that has been done connecting the two phenomena, suggest some directions future studies might go, and identify challenges to understanding the link between the two. The focus is on stereotypes regarding political opponents rather than one's own political group.

The extant literature that explicitly addresses political stereotypes has primarily assessed their role as a *source* – or catalyst – of affective polarization (e.g., Busby et al., 2021; Ahler & Sood, 2020). Holding stereotypes about political groups leads to a 'spillover' of affect between associated attributes – say, from 'vegans' to 'left-wingers'. Furthermore, stereotypes involve a mental image of groups that are more distinct, extreme, and/or internally homogeneous than they are, which renders political outgroups more threatening and even easier to dehumanize. Indeed, reducing stereotypes has been shown to be effective in decreasing levels of affective polarization (Ahler & Sood, 2018). As will be argued below, affective polarization might in turn also *foster* political stereotypes. After all, affective polarization involves cognitive biases that have the potential to strengthen stereotypes downstream. Once we have an emotional stake in an intergroup conflict, we are drawn to emphasizing the differences with the outgroup.

Hence, this chapter argues that there is an affinity between the two phenomena given their shared roots in intergroup classification, projection, and bias. Political stereotyping might

even be considered the cognitive counterpart of affective polarization. Given this symbiosis, there is a real danger that the two reinforce each other in a spiral of deepening disaffection and increasingly distorted mental images of the outgroup. Disentangling the two mechanisms is not easy, however. In our minds, mental images regarding political and nonpolitical attributes often go strongly together (Mason & Wronski, 2018) and they are updated in parallel (Westwood & Peterson, 2020). Perhaps both phenomena emerge together as soon as 'politics becomes our identity' (Mason, 2018).

This chapter will explore these theoretical affinities. By putting this in a comparative perspective, the chapter will point out the complexities involved when studying the topic of polarizing political stereotypes outside the two-party context (the US) that has hitherto dominated this field. The chapter will also report on the (small number of) extant studies that have looked at political stereotypes and affective polarization directly. In a subsequent section, it will delve into the question of whether some political stereotypes might be associated with more affective polarization than others. In the final section, I outline some open questions and directions for future research.

POLITICAL STEREOTYPES

Defining Political Stereotypes

Stereotypes are 'beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours of members of certain groups' (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996, p. 240). When stereotypes pertain to *politically* defined groups (e.g., partisans, ideological camps, issue groups), they are *political stereotypes*. Stereotypes are not inherently negative (Schneider, 2005). Indeed, when applied to our *ingroup*, they are usually positive, and political outgroups too might be associated with redeeming attributes. Nor are political stereotypes inherently completely 'wrong'. They tend to include attributes that have a certain degree of predictive power, to which we tend to assign more weight through heuristics on representativeness (see Kahneman & Tversky, 1972; Bordalo et al., 2016). For example, if living in a city is more commonly associated with progressives than the wider population, the stereotype emerges that progressives live in the city, and that city dwellers are progressive. Of course, even if the baseline correlation exists, this does not mean that *all* progressives are urbanites.

Moreover, while political stereotypes can be based on everyday observations regarding the attributes of various political groups, this is not the only (or even likely the most relevant) source. Stereotypes are also constructed through selective portrayals of 'exemplars' (Smith & Zárate, 1992) in the discourse of political elites, media, and others. For instance, in their selection of guests for a news show, editors might select individuals they deem representative (rightly or not) of a political group, thus creating or reinforcing stereotypes. Politicians too play an important role by providing us with depictions of political groups. They use group appeals (Dolinsky, 2023) to draw connections between political and social groups. They can do so simply because they hold such a stereotype themselves, but stereotypes can also be created strategically, for instance, to weaken their opponents through association with a group or idea.

While research on political stereotypes in the US has predominantly focused on stereotypes regarding partisan groups (such as Democrats and Republicans), stereotypes will not always

neatly follow partisan lines, especially in multiparty systems. Some stereotypes might apply to multiple partisan groups – for instance, all left-wing partisan groups might be associated with urban dwelling. Stereotypes can also be rampant with regard to those holding political opinions that are not so easily equated with a particular party. Hence, just as affective polarization can be rooted in any political identity, it is reasonable for political stereotypes to also potentially extend to any politically identified group, including ideological camps (like 'left-wingers') and issue groups (such as 'opponents of refugees') (see Chapter 15 in this *Handbook*).

Domains of Stereotypes

The content of political stereotypes is obviously highly specific to each particular context and historical period. All societies feature stereotypes that citizens of another society or period might not even recognize as political. Still, political stereotypes can arguably be categorized into more abstract domains. Extending a classification proposed by Busby et al. (2021), in this chapter I propose four such domains: stereotypes about (1) social groups, (2) ideology, (3) traits, and (outside the Busby et al. classification) (4) lifestyle. Developing a classification is useful because not all types of stereotypes might be equally polarizing, as will be discussed below.

A stereotype concerns *social group* membership when it involves associating political camps with identifiers along such lines as class, religion, gender, education, race, occupation, etc. These are generally ascribed and not *explicitly* political (but, of course, often politicized). Research from the US confirms that Americans have strong (and often distorted) mental associations between political groups and region, race, class, and gender, among others (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Busby et al., 2021; Westwood & Peterson, 2020), and Zollinger (2022) confirms the existence of such mental images in the Swiss case. It is an open question whether such social group stereotyping is equally prominent in all democracies, especially in cases where alignment with social cleavages is (historically) low.

Stereotypes concerning *ideology* pertain to assessing others' beliefs (Brady & Sniderman, 1985). Again, there is evidence that Americans link partisan groups to particular issue positions, ideological stances, and values (Chambers et al., 2006; Graham et al., 2012; Westfall et al., 2015; Howat, 2019; Goggin et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2019). While these associations can be informative (providing substantive content to political conflict), distortions in beliefs about outgroup political attitudes are common (Wilson et al., 2020, p. 224; Bordalo et al., 2016). In multiparty systems, ideological stereotypes are perhaps particularly prevalent, given parties' specialized positions, although it might be challenging for citizens in very fragmented systems to have mental images of the ideology of each and every party that is around.

Traits (such as being 'rigid' or 'unintelligent') are a third domain. They too have been documented to be prevalent in US studies (Iyengar et al., 2012; Clifford, 2020; Scheffer et al., 2022), possibly in particularly among less knowledgeable citizens. Busby et al. (2021) argue that the presence of such stereotypes is evidence that political camps are deemed full-fledged identity groups in their own right. As will be discussed below, stereotyping political groups in terms of their traits might hence be particularly likely to deepen affective polarization.

Finally, it is possible to imagine a fourth domain of stereotypes, regarding 'lifestyle,' which encompasses cultural preferences and consumption choices. These features strongly figure in public discourse about polarization ('meat-eating Republicans, bicycle-driving Democrats'), but their relation to polarization remains largely underexplored (but see Lee, 2021). It is likely

that this dimension, too, lends itself to affective polarization, as politics becomes equated with a way of life. In addition, it is plausible that lifestyle stereotypes are on the rise, as political conflict increasingly permeates daily life, turning a wider range of everyday choices into political markers (Talisse, 2019).

The nature of stereotypes is important as it likely impacts intergroup relations. Below, we will explore this when we ask whether some stereotypes are more polarizing than others. First, we will explore which mechanisms might be involved in creating a relation between stereotypes and affective polarization in the first place.

POLITICAL STEREOTYPES AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

There is a clear theoretical affinity between political stereotypes and affective polarization. The (cognitive) categorization of ingroups and outgroups by stereotypical attributes goes together with the (emotional and social) distancing towards and derogation of these groups. Because they might be shaped and updated simultaneously and reinforce each other in a reciprocal manner, it is a simplification to speak of one 'causing' the other. However, below I will discuss the two classes of mechanisms (stereotypes fostering affective polarization, and affective polarization fostering stereotypes) separately. While difficult to disentangle, understanding the relative weights of these respective mechanisms could be the goal of future studies.

Political Stereotypes Fostering Affective Polarization

I argue that political stereotypes might be a source of, or at the very least a catalyst for, the intensification of affective polarization through two classes of mechanisms. These could be labeled 'spill-over' and 'entitativity.' *Spill-over* occurs if the negative affect individuals feel towards groups, ideas, or behaviors (to stick to the example provided before, 'vegans') spills over to the political camps they are associated with (say, 'progressives'). This process involves 'emotional contagion', as the initial negative appraisal of a specific attribute extends to shape the overall sentiment towards the corresponding political faction. If apolitical (or less obviously political) cues get linked to political factions, it reduces citizens' willingness to engage or interact with political opponents (Lee, 2021). This mechanism also finds empirical support in studies documenting the parallel updating of affect towards both racial and political outgroups in the US, suggesting a shared underlying cognitive process (Westwood & Peterson, 2020). This is also in line with the literature on social sorting, which shows that mental overlap between political and nonpolitical attributes fosters antipathy between political camps (e.g. Mason, 2018; Harteveld, 2021). In this 'spill-over' scenario, affective polarization between political camps becomes a vehicle to express or channel previously unrelated social tensions. These other divides were there, but they have now become (even) more political.

The second class of mechanisms through which stereotypes can deepen affective polarization pertains to *entitativity* – that is, the degree to which groups are perceived as being coherent and distinct entities (Campbell, 1958). Holding political stereotypes means that the political outgroup indeed becomes more recognizable and distinctive (possiblyunwarrantedly so, especially if the stereotype is highly distorted). This increased entitativity might, in turn, contribute to heightened intergroup animosity, reinforcing the emotional divide between political factions (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Mason & Wronski, 2018; Harteveld, 2021). Furthermore,

the perception of out-groups as internally homogeneous and extreme masks the underlying cross-cutting nature of societal divisions, exacerbating polarization by obscuring the potential commonalities that are important for a functioning democracy (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). The fact that citizens overestimate political outgroups' homogeneity is confirmed in the US context (e.g., Ahler & Sood, 2018), and Americans also think their opponents are much more distinct and extreme on most issues than they are (e.g., Yudkin et al., 2018). This overestimation intensifies affective polarization by cultivating an environment where the perceived distinctions between groups appear absolute and insurmountable.

Affective Polarization Fostering Stereotypes

Just as stereotypes can contribute to affective polarization, the intensification of affective polarization can, in turn, lead to the emergence and perpetuation of political stereotypes. The reason is that affective polarization involves or reinforces cognitive biases. One of these is *outgroup differentiation*. As individuals become more emotionally attached to their own political group and emotionally detached from the political outgroup, they may engage in processes of social categorization that emphasize the differences between their own group and the opposing group. This differentiation is accompanied by the exaggeration of negative attributes and the minimization of positive attributes of the outgroup, contributing to the formation of stereotypes.

In addition, affective polarization individuals are likely to engage in *motivated reasoning.* When individuals are emotionally invested in their political identity and hold strong negative feelings toward the opposing group, they are more likely to selectively attend to information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2004). This biased information processing can reinforce existing stereotypes and hinder individuals from seeing the nuances and diversity within the opposing group. As affective polarization intensifies, these cognitive biases may become more pronounced, leading to a reinforced feedback loop where stereotypes are further solidified.

Future research could explore which of these (or other) cognitive biases reinforce stereotypes. In doing so, it is important to establish which component of affective polarization (outgroup derogation or ingroup affection) is associated with which biases. The mere fact that citizens identify with, or have an emotional attachment to, a political camp is possibly enough to result in differentiation and motivated reasoning. Hence, the outgroup derogation involved in affective polarization need not be the main culprit. Still, affective polarization might *exacerbate* these mechanisms. When a political group is disliked, it reinforces the need to differentiate oneself from it; similarly, it increases directional goals in selecting and attending to information. Future studies could disentangle these mechanisms.

ARE ALL STEREOTYPES EQUALLY POLARIZING?

It is possible that some domains of political stereotypes are more polarizing than others. Understanding which these might be requires more theoretical and empirical work, but some plausible avenues might already be sketched out.

The polarizing potential of stereotypes might depend, first of all, on the *domain* involved. Busby et al. (2021, pp. 8–10) argue that different domains of stereotypes are indicative of

different ways of perceiving the nature of political camps. Ideological stereotypes involve seeing the outgroup as defined primarily by their politics; hence, group membership is instrumental: a means to a political end. Holding social group stereotypes means political groups are seen as 'vehicles' that represent the interests of a set of other groups (a 'coalitional' view). Holding trait stereotypes means the political group is perceived as 'a social identity in its own right' (idem).

These authors argue that holding stereotypes of the ideological and social group category does not necessarily deepen antipathy and might even invite perspective-taking. Trait stereotypes, by contrast, might be particularly associated with antipathy (and, conversely, with sympathy when it involves ingroup stereotypes). Such stereotypes essentialize political opponents into their own group. (The latter might arguably also apply to lifestyle stereotypes.) If so, ideological stereotypes might above all be associated with overestimating the level of disagreement and hence primarily *ideological* polarization, while the other categories of stereotypes would more directly foster affective polarization. Indeed, Busby et al. (2021) find that those who hold (mostly) trait stereotypes have deeper levels of antipathy than those who hold ideological and social group stereotypes. Other studies did find that social stereotypes, too, are associated with more polarization (Ahler & Sood, 2018) and that perceiving ideological differences, as well as perceived value conflict, foster outgroup antipathy (Howat, 2021). Hence, this relation is not self-evident, and more research is needed to expand the scope of this work.

Affective polarization might also be more strongly associated with particular *subdomains*. Among ideological stereotypes, it is possible that those pertaining to cultural issues rather than economic ones are more affectively polarizing because of their allegedly more immediate moral connotations (Johnston & Wronski, 2015). Similarly, within the social groups domain, stereotypes regarding 'newly politicized' or 'identity' (in the terms of Stuckelberger & Tresch, 2022) groups including gender, ethnicity, and urbanity might also lend themselves for affective polarization in comparison to traditional economic-based groups such as class. The former are (now) arguably more often politicized using the logic of zero-sum status hierarchies rather than distributional conflict, which could increase intergroup threat perceptions.

Why would it matter if some stereotypes are more polarizing than others? One implication is that political elites have agency in shaping the level of affective polarization by shifting the nature of the groups they claim to appeal to. However, this conclusion requires more empirical inquiry. Understanding the relative extent to which these dimensions lend themselves for affective polarization is also useful because it can inform targeted strategies for polarization reduction. I will further discuss this potential below.

INTERVENTIONS

If political stereotypes contribute to polarization, reducing them might be a fruitful way to depolarize societies. In this section, I will discuss how this might best be achieved. Chapters 29 and 30 in this *Handbook* go into the topic of interventions in more depth. Here, I will focus on the implications of the above for interventions targeting stereotypes specifically.

This chapter is not the place to discuss whether depolarization is normatively desirable in the first place, as this depends on one's assessment of the nature and consequences of affective polarization (see e.g. Chapter 3 in this *Handbook*). However, in the context of the current chapter, it is relevant to note that affective polarization rooted in stereotypes (especially if

these are distorted) is arguably *more problematic* (and hence relevant to target in interventions) than affective polarization that reflects a more accurate understanding of the differences and similarities guiding political conflict. As noted, political stereotypes are not necessarily always 'wrong' but nevertheless tend to involve at least *exaggerations* about political opponents, ascribing to them monotonous ideas, traits, social features, and other attributes that they often do not, in reality, possess. These risks entrench political polarization in perceived intergroup differences that are false, or at least exaggerated. Democracy involves and requires differences and conflict, but conflict rooted in political stereotypes becomes self-referencing (Talisse, 2019). All of this makes depolarization interventions that focus on correcting stereotypes potentially more appealing than some other forms of interventions, while it is important to acknowledge the ethical dilemmas involved.

Despite the centrality of stereotypes in the public debate, there are only a few studies targeting depolarization through stereotype interventions specifically. However, these appear promising. Interventions can be successful in correcting (inaccurate) political stereotypes and – as a result – reducing animosity between partisans (Ahler & Sood, 2018a; Rothschild et al, 2019). A 'megastudy' of interventions found that 'misperception correction' interventions (specifically, providing accurate information about support for a number of undemocratic practices among the outgroup) had some success in reducing partisan animosity, but above all bolstered democratic norms. This is understandable given that the domain of the misperception correction concerned democratic norms. Relatedly, there is also evidence for successful interventions regarding so-called 'second-order' misperceptions – that is, correcting misperceptions about the affect or malign intentions of the outgroup towards the ingroup (Ruggeri et al., 2021). All of this is striking, given the difficulty studies have found when it comes to correcting other types of perceptions, such as factual beliefs (Walter et al., 2020).

While such interventions are thus promising, they have mostly been tested in the US context. Designing interventions that work in other contexts requires, first, a better understanding of the mechanisms shaping political stereotypes in fragmented contexts and knowing which dimensions and attributes are most prone to fostering affective polarization. Secondly, for interventions to plausibly take place within a multiparty context, their very design needs to allow for the presence of many political outgroups (and attributes). Because stereotype-correcting interventions typically involve one outgroup at a time, directly correcting stereotypes would appear challenging.

Some possible approaches are the following, ranging from more direct to more indirect approaches. First, and most concretely, interventions could focus on directly *correcting stereotypes*. Providing citizens with the actual social composition, ideological position, lifestyle, etc., of (average) political outgroup members could improve the accuracy of mental images and, by extension reduce affective polarization (see Ahler & Sood, 2018). Secondly, interventions might focus on *shifting stereotype salience*. The goal would be to activate a different class of stereotypes in people's minds (say, from traits to ideological stereotypes), shifting the salience from one class to another. To function as a depolarization intervention, this shifting should move the focus away from domains and subdomains that are the most distorted and/or the most sensitive to fostering polarization. In their place, interventions should increase the salience of associations that are most cross-cutting. Finally, rather than 'correcting' or 'shifting' stereotypes, interventions could focus on encouraging *reflection* – that is, target the process of creating mental images itself. This could be done, for instance, by raising citizens'

awareness of the complexity of the social world (Kugler, 2020). Doing so might result in more accurate mental images and reduced affective polarization.

NEXT STEPS

As noted, the study of affective polarization and political stereotypes is in its infancy. This section, therefore, lists some avenues that I think would be fruitful to explore.

Disentangling the Relation Between Stereotypes and Polarization

What are the mutual dynamics between political stereotypes and affective polarization? Given that the relationship between political stereotypes and affective polarization is likely reciprocal (as argued above), an important avenue for future research would be to study the dynamics of this interaction longitudinally and through experiments. Studies could track the evolution of stereotypes and emotions within and across political groups, which would shed light on the question of whether shifts in one phenomenon precede or follow changes in the other. Similarly, researchers could experimentally manipulate either participants' affect towards political outgroups or correct or shift their stereotypes, and observe whether this leads to broader 'updating'.

How does the relation between stereotypes and polarization differ (or not) across contexts? Most empirical studies quoted so far have been confined to the US (with some notable exceptions such as Ruggeri et al., 2021), which might be peculiar in many regards (such as the two-party system which arguablymakes stereotyping 'easier'). Gathering more data in other societies and comparing these is important. Comparisons across various political contexts, including different party systems and levels of ideological fragmentation, as well as across societies with variations in the nature of historically salient cleavages and labels, can illuminate how these factors shape the strength and nature of the relationship. This is also methodologically important: adapting and validating measurement instruments across diverse cultural and political landscapes ensures that our measurement of political stereotypes transcends cultural boundaries.

Operationalizing Political Stereotypes in Different Settings

How can we better measure political stereotypes through different methodologies? Before rushing to questions of the causal relation with affective polarization, political stereotypes first have to be operationalized properly. So far, they have been studied using survey questions (open or closed). Combining this with other methods, such as experiments and content analyses, can offer a fuller picture of political stereotypes. While surveys provide valuable self-reported data on individuals' perceptions, behaviors, and emotions, they still rely on self-reporting, which is likely subject to various biases. Implicit measures (like Implicit Association Tests, or IATs) could unveil automatic associations (see Chapter 4 of this *Handbook*). This would allow the examination of the role of (and interplay between) explicit and implicit stereotypes in shaping affective polarization. Furthermore, big data and computational techniques such as Large Language Models (LLMs) seem promising because they allow measurement and analysis of political stereotypes in a less intrusive way, and also do so on a larger scale,

which would enable these measures to be linked to macro measures of affective polarization. The material for such analysis could come fromsocial media platforms, online discussions, or other types of digital interactions. In these data, researchers can operationalize a user's way of depicting political outgroups, as well as their affect towards these groups.

Normative Implications and Solutions

(Why) should we be worried about polarizing stereotypes? Above, I argued that stereotype-induced affective polarization is particularly worrying because it roots interpersonal and political conflict in differences that might be partly imagined. A functioning democracy requires of its citizens both awareness of politically relevant differences and a minimal willingness to collaborate with (or at least tolerate) political opponents. If political stereotypes distort the former and subsequently harm the latter, they would be a cause for worry indeed. Still, this argument is quite schematic, and the implications of political stereotypes and affective polarization for democratic discourse and citizen engagement warrant further inquiry, both theoretically and empirically. For instance, democratic theorists could explore what can be expected of citizens in a democracy in terms of the content and accuracy of their beliefs about other citizens. Empirical studies could examine how the interplay between political stereotypes and polarization shapes concrete outcomes such as political participation, information-seeking behaviors, and willingness to engage across ideological lines. Similarly, as argued above, such studies could explore whether reduced affective polarization leads to more constructive and inclusive political discussions. All of this could offer insights into fostering healthier democratic deliberation.

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