Undue hate: a behavioral economic analysis of hostile polarization in US politics and beyond

• Part I: The Biased Righteous Mind (Intro, ch 1, ch 2)

• Part II: Explanations (chs 3-6)

• Part III: Implications (ch 7)
Intro, Ch 1: Motivation, definitions

• Affective polarization in the US exploded over last ~4 decades. Why?
• Many (most?) of us have a vague sense it’s due (partly) to misperceptions...
• But feelings can’t be wrong?
• Actually, sure they can be
• Our feelings about other people are based on beliefs about who they are (what they’ll say and do in different situations)
• Those beliefs can be wrong – causing corresponding feelings to be wrong too (not the feelings we’d feel with correct beliefs!)
Proposed definitions

- P and Q = 2 people; (potential) therm scores = measure of like/dislike
- Assume everyone has beliefs about everyone else’s action probabilities – for any actions we could take! (actions include statements/stated opinions)

- Definition: P is subject to **biased dislike** toward Q if P’s thermometer rating of Q would increase if P were to hold Bayesian beliefs about Q’s action probabilities given P’s information and priors.

- You like them too little because you’ve misinterpreted available information... Agnostic about which actions are good/bad
- Could also dislike someone too much b/c that’s what your info supports (you’ve got misleading info)

- Definition: P is subject to **excessive dislike** of Q if P’s thermometer rating of Q would increase if P were to hold correct beliefs about Q’s action probabilities.

- Biased dislike is more interesting; Excessive dislike is often reasonable empirical proxy... Even if you just watch Fox and Fox just says Ds are bad... you should know that Fox just says this and filter it appropriately...

- Definition: P is subject to the **affective polarization bias (APB)** if P experiences biased dislike toward Q as a direct or indirect result of disagreement [polarization] with Q.

- APB = too much affective polarization. Could be due to political disagreement. But APB can occur in any relationship
Ch 2: Evidence

• Mostly US partisan politics
• Examples of relationships (belief biases and problems in relationships)
• https://www.dropbox.com/s/cx3e44g90tq5k4j/ch%202.docx?dl=0

• Do you know a cool paper showing people get too hostile after disagreement?
• Or fights/hostility between couples or friends driven by them misunderstanding each other?
• Great if you can let me know! 😊 (Thanks!)
Ch 3: Over-arching biases (evidence of direct effects on affective polarization?)

Motivated reasoning
- Motivated confirmation bias/myside bias
- Group motives
- Individual motives

Overprecision
- Binary thinking; manichaeism
- Lack of intellectual humility (willingness to say “I was wrong”)
- Naïve realism ('objectivity bias')
- Unmotivated confirmation bias (predictive brain)
- WYSIATI; stories not stats ('unobserved information neglect')
Ch 4: Tastes and truth

• 2 theories for APB due to general disagreements:

• 1. Naïve realism ('objectivity bias'): we overestimate objective validity of our beliefs – and tastes (yes?) – e.g. moral values (Moral foundations theory: diff moral values are like different tastes – yeah pushback I know but basic idea is valid? Enke, JPE, 2020)

• So I think if we disagree on value-driven policy, you don’t have my values - then you don’t have ‘correct’ values - so there must be something wrong with you (cites on this inference?) – if values are like tastes, my dislike is APB

• 2. False consensus: overestimate agreement on matters of taste/belief (yes results from naïve realism – but very different theory from #1...)

• Overestimating agreement can (in theory) cause undue suspicion: I think you can’t really disagree with me on policy X (because of false consensus), so if you say you do, you must have ulterior motive... (empirical evidence?)

• Partisan sorting in last ~50 yrs – more disagreement – more APB
Ch 5: Strategy (tit for tat gone bad)

• All relationships are games... most relationship games involve some conflict of interest... (more for me is less than you)

• Aggressive strategic actions can look ‘worse’ than they are (cause APB) due to ‘limited strategic thinking’ – level k models and more

• Repeated interaction: hardball – and negative character inferences (APB) – escalate jointly (conflict cycles/spirals) due to various biases (motivated attribution/memory, limited foresight, limited memory)

• No experimental evidence that when ‘tit for tat’ goes bad (when there’s conflict cycle/spiral) we misjudge the other side’s character (?). And no clear empirical evidence of tit for tat in politics (?)
Ch 6: Information

- Most obvious explanation for growth in bias over time? But unclear?
- Ok – maybe no echo chambers – but yes more selective exposure
- Cable news, online news, social media... and offline (residential sorting, social sorting)
- Selective exposure doesn’t just mean policy/ideology-confirming info. Also anti-out-party info (cites?)
- We’re also over-exposed to ‘bad behavior’ by other side b/c of nut-picking and overly nutty/aggressive behavior in general on social media, other media (skewed exposure?)
- Selective and skewed exposure causes APB b/c of undue credulity (motivated and non-motivated: cognitive laziness, limited strategic thinking, wysiati, correlation neglect, mere exposure)
- No direct evidence on media causing biased beliefs in turn causing dislike (?) but...
- Law of group polarization + (some) clean evidence of media effects on ideological/issue polarization + Bayesian beliefs are martingales implies influence of selective exposure is non-Bayesian (at least causes more disagreement... which in turn likely causes more APB)
- Evidence in support of contact theory for politics (there are a good number of studies now!): improved understanding of other side makes us like them more, thus our prior dislike must have been due to misunderstanding (APB)
Ch 7: Implications

• Need more research on prevalence/magnitude of bias (especially for elites/politicians, other relationships; field experiments would be great)
• Drutman recs (to get multi-parties going), ‘final 5’ (Gehl/Porter book)
• Bias education – for politicians especially? (too absurd?)
• Acceptance of differences (federalism? Will I get in trouble for saying it?)
• Issue linkage/efficient logrolling
• 3rd party mediation (too absurd?)
• Anti-hardball policies (supreme court terms etc)
• Do the right thing (reform presidential pardon power?)
• More constructive in person contact (in House and Senate! And for voters but hard to scale?)
• Public pressure on social media platforms to fight good fight
• E.g. Twitter could encourage constructive diverse exposure by showing not just # of followers, but ideological distribution? And/or of Likes for each tweet? (So you can see if a tweet was just preaching to choir or not? Encourage people to ‘fish’ for good stuff not bad?)
• Anti-polarization Manhattan project (too absurd to ask for?)