

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because It Might Help Us Save American Democracy

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Healthy democratic systems feature competing visions of a good society, and that competition can be beneficial for society as a whole. At the same time, democracies require tolerance, trust, and cooperation to avoid the kind of [toxic polarization that puts democracy itself at risk](#). Increasingly, the extent of affective polarization threatens American democracy. Different social groups (such as liberals and conservatives or Democrats and Republicans) not only differ and disagree with one another but also come to [deeply dislike and derogate one another](#).

Before turning to the question of what can be done to curb destructive forms of polarization, it is necessary to understand the ways in which liberal-leftists and conservative-rightists differ from one another. More than 20 years of research in political psychology finds that liberal-leftists and conservative-rightists differ in many ways when it comes to attitudes, values, personality characteristics—including authoritarianism and social dominance orientation—[and system justification tendencies](#). For example, there is a significant divide over the values of equality and tradition. As people become more and more conservative, they value tradition more and equality less, and as people become more and more liberal, [they value tradition less and equality more](#). Research carried out all over the world shows that leftists prioritize harmony, benevolence, and universalism, whereas rightists prioritize power, conformity, security, tradition, and self-interest ([read more](#)).

“...Research in social science may yet point the way to more constructive forms of public discourse.”

Moreover, hundreds of studies, when meta-analyzed, confirm that liberal-leftists exhibit personality traits of openness, curiosity, creativity, and novelty-seeking, whereas conservative-rightists exhibit conscientiousness and needs for order, discipline, achievement, and rule-following ([read more](#)). Supporters of President Donald Trump, even more than supporters of other Republican as well as Democratic presidential candidates, [score especially high on authoritarian aggression and group-based dominance](#). That is, they are more likely to endorse statements such as “What our country needs instead of more ‘civil rights’ is a good stiff dose of law and order” and “Some groups of people must be kept in their place.” All of these differences make it harder for people on the liberal-left and conservative-right to understand and appreciate each other and work together on serious problems facing the U.S. and the world at large ([read more](#)).

At the same time, conservative-rightists in the U.S. and many other countries tend to exhibit relatively high levels of system justification, which means that they are consciously or non-consciously motivated to regard the way things are as the way they should be, to see existing social systems (such as capitalism, the nuclear family, and the “American way”) as [basically fair, legitimate, and desirable](#). This creates an opportunity, at least potentially, to reach conservative-rightists and to encourage them to cooperate rather than defect from the tenets of liberal democracy as historically practiced in the U.S.

The two of us, in collaboration with Aaron Kay of Duke University, devised an experimental intervention in which we attempted to harness system justification motivation on behalf of the preservation of American democracy. Specifically, we exposed Democrats

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and Republicans to a passage encouraging them to “stay faithful to the principles of democracy and civility and respect” and stick with what makes America special, its “faith in the system and trust in each other.” In three experiments carried out in 2021 and 2022, we found that, compared to a control condition, participants assigned to the system-justifying message were significantly less likely to endorse various forms of partisan animosity, such as reducing the number of polling stations in areas that support the opposing party and ignoring unfavorable court rulings and election outcomes. And, in two out of three cases, they also [reported less willingness to use threat, intimidation, harassment, and violence to advance their political goals](#).

This intervention provides some modest basis for optimism that research in social science may yet point the way to more constructive forms of public discourse. Among other things, defenders of liberal democracy must find ways of encouraging Americans to maintain faith in their democratic system, as flawed as it is, and to inspire pride in it and dedication to its continuation and improvement. Only then will it be possible to reduce levels of toxic polarization and allow people of divergent ideological inclinations to work together—dare we say patriotically—on urgent problems facing the nation and the world at large. Accomplishing this will require genuine political leadership on the left, right, and center, and a renewal of the nation’s shared commitment to democratic norms and principles. It will also require political elites—especially on the right—to unambiguously denounce antidemocratic activity in their ranks. At this moment in history, Americans need to process the past, some of which is deeply painful and divisive—including the events of January 6, 2021—and find ways of maintaining and improving democratic traditions and practicing them openly, fairly, rigorously, and conscientiously.



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