

## Ideological Polarization and Social Psychology

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### Summary

*Ideology is a recurrent feature of human societies. Ideologies provide people with frameworks to evaluate the relative legitimacy of different approaches to social order. Such ideologies often involve an opposition between right-leaning ideologies, which tend to justify and maintain the traditional order, and left-leaning ideologies, which advocate for systemic reforms to reduce hierarchies. Social psychological investigations of ideology explore the root motivations and moral foundations of people's attraction to left versus right ideologies. In particular, such work focuses on understanding the motivational dynamics of ideologies that justify the status quo, promote authoritarian control, and rationalize social dominance hierarchies. Social psychological research also investigates information-processing biases that increase the polarization between left and right. These insights can be applied to bridge divides within ideologically polarized communities.*

### Keywords

- [ideological polarization](#)
- [ideological bias](#)
- [system justification](#)
- [authoritarianism](#)
- [social dominance](#)
- [dual-process model of ideology](#)
- [moral foundations](#)

### Subjects

- Social Psychology
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# Introduction

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Conflicts over ideas tend to fracture communities. The conventional wisdom to never discuss politics or religion at the dinner table acknowledges the power of ideological divisions to corrode relationships. Indeed, when the ideological climate is highly polarized, people are reluctant to fraternize with the opposing ideological camp—couples break up over political disagreements (Afifi et al., [2020](#)), and parents object to their children marrying someone from an opposite political party (Iyengar et al., [2019](#)). At an extreme, ideological polarization becomes “cancel culture,” where people shut out anyone whose opinions they deem politically incorrect. To turn a popular slogan on its head, it seems the political is personal.

How does ideology come to have such a powerful hold on people’s hearts and minds? Two key lines of inquiry in social psychology address this question. The first examines dispositional and situational factors that determine what particular ideology a person is likely to align with. The second investigates general information-processing biases that increase the polarization between people who are aligned with opposing ideological camps.

This article reviews theories and research findings related to each of these key contributions. Ideological polarization is a complex, multi-determined phenomenon that is influenced not just by psychological factors but also by a variety of historical, sociological, economic, and political institutional factors. The intention of this review is not to oversimplify polarization by reducing this phenomenon just to psychological causes. Rather the intention is to highlight some of the insights that psychological approaches can provide to potentially complement insights from other disciplines and levels of analysis.

Before delving into social psychological work on these topics, it is useful to define what is meant by ideology because this term has a variety of potentially distinct referents (Eagleton, [2007](#)). Social psychological work on ideology focuses on sociopolitical ideologies, which encompass people’s

beliefs about the legitimate bases of authority and social order, the duties of the state to the person and of the person to the state, and the acceptability of status and power inequalities. An ideology is essentially a morality of the social order, and ideological judgments can thus be characterized as moral judgments about what sociopolitical institutions ought to exist and how those institutions ought to behave. There are a wide variety of such ideologies, but many can be mapped onto a bipolar left–right spectrum (Jost et al., [2009](#)). Ideologies aligned with the right tend to justify the sociopolitical order and uphold traditional norms, whereas ideologies aligned with the left typically challenge traditional norms and seek to reform or replace the sociopolitical order, typically to reduce group-based hierarchies.

## **Social-Cognitive Roots of Sociopolitical Ideology**

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To gain insight into the roots of modern ideological conflicts, it is essential to analyze the factors that influence people to align with a particular ideological camp. Social psychological work on this topic investigates how people are attracted to particular ideologies in order to fulfill underlying social-cognitive needs.

## **Psychological Advantages of System-Justifying Ideologies**

System justification theory (SJT) provides a particularly rich analysis of psychological factors that determine the relative appeal of ideologies on the right versus the left of the political spectrum. SJT proposes that people have a general motivation to believe that their sociopolitical system is basically fair and rational, and preferable to any potential alternatives (Jost et al., [2004](#)). This motivation grants a considerable psychological advantage to ideologies that justify the system over ideologies that challenge the system. SJT posits that the motivation to justify the system emerges from more basic epistemic, existential, and social relational needs (Jost et al., [2017](#)). Epistemic needs involve seeking an ordered, structured, and predictable

experience of the world. To the extent that the sociopolitical system provides a normative framework with clear rules, expectations, and codes of conduct, then upholding that system is one means to express a preference for epistemic clarity and structure (Jost et al., [2017](#)).

Existential needs involve a desire for personal security and material or symbolic continuity of identity. To the extent that the sociopolitical system provides protection from physical threats, economic sustenance, and symbolic attachments that transcend the mortal self, then supporting the system is one means to express existential needs for security and symbolic continuity (Jost et al., [2017](#)). Finally, relational needs involve a desire to connect with others and maintain a shared reality that expresses and sustains such connections. To the extent that the sociopolitical system provides a common reference point of meaning, then people may express their need to share reality with others by conforming to the traditions, norms, and rituals of their shared system (Jost et al., [2017](#); Shepherd et al., [2017](#)). For example, people may bond through their co-participation in traditional rituals, such as nationalist holidays, that express collective pride and gratitude towards their system (Eibach et al., [2015](#)).

Classical conservatism represents a prototypic example of a system-justifying ideology because conservatives tend to support traditional norms and institutions, whereas liberals advocate for changes that disrupt the system's norms and traditional practices (Jost et al., [2009](#)). In particular, conservatives tend to support policies that have the consequence of maintaining traditional hierarchies within their sociopolitical system, including economic and social/moral hierarchies, whereas liberals support policies that seek to dismantle such hierarchies (Jost et al., [2009](#)). Evidence linking conservatism to system-justification includes research showing that conservatives report more favorable explicit evaluations of the institutions and symbols of their sociopolitical system (Jost et al., [2008](#)). Even on implicit attitude measures, conservatives show a stronger automatic preference for the concepts of tradition (vs. progress) and conformity (vs. rebellion) compared to liberals (Jost et al., [2008](#)). Compared to liberals,

conservatives also show a stronger automatic preference for groups that have high status in the social hierarchy (Jost et al., [2008](#)). Of course, people who self-identify as conservatives may sometimes be vocal critics of their current sociopolitical reality, particularly when they perceive social trends as undermining the traditional foundations of social order. The section on “pseudoconservatism” discusses how such system critical expressions of conservatism could be accounted for within SJT.

## **Linking System Justification to Social-Cognitive Needs**

A variety of lines of evidence link endorsement of system-justifying ideologies to chronic and situationally induced activation of epistemic, existential, and relational needs (Jost, [2017](#)). Endorsement of system-justifying ideologies, such as social conservatism, is reliably associated with chronic epistemic needs, such as need for closure (Jost, [2017](#)). System justification is also linked to greater cognitive rigidity, which may reflect a need for epistemic security. For example, North Americans who endorse system-justifying ideologies, including free market ideology and social conservatism, are less likely to use analytical reasoning to override erroneous intuitive responses even to apolitical inferential reasoning problems compared to individuals who reject system-justifying ideologies (Sterling et al., [2016](#)).

Endorsement of system-justifying ideologies is also associated with chronic reactivity to existential threats such as frightening and disgusting stimuli (e.g., Ahn et al., [2014](#); Hibbing et al., [2014](#)). For example, endorsement of system-justifying ideology is linked to larger bilateral amygdala volume, a neural region that processes threatening information (Nam et al., [2018](#)). However, other work indicates that conservatives have heightened neural reactivity to stimuli in general, not just threats (Tritt et al., [2016](#)). Finally, research has linked system-justifying ideologies to social relational needs. For instance, conservatives are more likely than liberals to overestimate the degree to which members of their ingroup agree with their views, and this overestimation of ingroup consensus is mediated by conservatives' greater need to share reality with others (Stern et al., [2014](#)).

The function of system-justifying ideologies to fulfill basic psychological needs has been explored in particular depth in research on compensatory control theory (CCT; Kay et al., [2008](#)). CCT emphasizes that thoughts of randomness threaten people's epistemic need for order and existential need for security, and these combined threats are acutely anxiety-provoking (Kay et al., [2010](#)). To fend off the anxieties of perceiving randomness, people are motivated to believe that life circumstances are controllable.

However, when the limits of internal, personal control over events become salient, people idealize the sociopolitical system as a compensatory, external source of control. The need to rely on the system as an external source of control when personal control is limited can thus be a particularly powerful impetus to engage in system-justifying reasoning. Indeed, a series of experiments supported CCT by showing that both chronic and situationally induced threats to personal control increase people's idealization of their sociopolitical system (Kay et al., [2008](#)).

### **System Justification Is Goal Directed**

The hypothesis that system justification is a motivated belief system receives direct support from research that examines how justification of the sociopolitical system fluctuates in response to motivationally relevant triggers (Jost et al., [2010](#); Kay & Friesen, [2011](#); Kay & Zanna, [2009](#)). A hallmark property of psychological goals is that when progress towards a given goal is threatened, goal-relevant cognitions and behaviors tend to be activated. By extension, researchers have investigated whether people activate system-justifying cognitions when the legitimacy of the status quo is challenged in order to maintain their preferred level of confidence in the system. For instance, people rationalize the status quo more after they have been exposed to system-threatening information (Lau et al., [2008](#)) than after they have been exposed to system-affirming information (Kay et al., [2009](#)). In a particularly striking demonstration of the goal-like properties of system justification, individuals showed stronger automatic positive evaluation of symbols of the sociopolitical system if they were experimentally exposed to system-threatening information (Liviatan & Jost, [2014](#)).

People also express stronger confidence in the legitimacy of their sociopolitical system if they are reminded of how their own well-being is dependent on that system (Kay et al., [2009](#); Shepherd & Kay, [2012](#)) or if they are led to believe that it would not be feasible to emigrate to an alternative system (Kay et al., [2009](#); Laurin et al., [2010](#)). The motivation to trust the system is so compelling that, when people are induced to feel dependent on the system, they actively avoid learning about relevant issues out of fear that learning might shake their confidence in the adequacy of the system's handling of those issues (Shepherd & Kay, [2012](#)).

This creates a self-reinforcing feedback loop where dependency on the system motivates people to avoid learning about issues that they rely on the system to handle, and this motivated ignorance in turn further entrenches their dependency on the system (Shepherd & Kay, [2012](#)). Thus, when people perceive themselves as “patients of the state” (Auyero, [2012](#)), they will be motivated to blissfully ignore the deficiencies of the sociopolitical system and thereby become more entrapped in their passive dependency.

## **Psychological Rewards of System Justification**

A number of lines of evidence supports the hypothesis that endorsing system-justifying ideologies promotes psychological well-being by buffering people from uncertainty and threats (Jost & Hunyady, [2003](#)). For instance, an analysis of nationally representative samples from 10 countries found that conservatives tend to report higher happiness and life satisfaction than liberals and these differences are mediated by conservatives' greater endorsement of the system-justifying belief that status inequities are due to hard work rather than luck (Napier & Jost, [2008](#)).

The link between conservatism and well-being is especially strong during periods of rising economic inequality, which supports SJT's premise that conservatives' belief that inequalities are justified protects them from experiencing frustration when they perceive widespread inequality (Napier & Jost, [2008](#)).

Laurin et al. ([2011](#)) made a particularly powerful contribution to understanding the psychological rewards of system justification through a series of studies that showed that exaggerating the fairness of the sociopolitical system functions to bolster the agentic motivation of members of low-status groups. Laurin et al. ([2011](#)) found that people who belonged to low-status socioeconomic or ethnic groups were more willing to invest time and resources in pursuing their long-term career and educational goals to the extent that they believed that the system was fair. By contrast, the goal investments of people who belonged to high socioeconomic status and ethnic majority groups were not contingent on their belief that the system is fair. The ironic implication is that ideological faith in the justice of the system may function to bolster the personal motivation of the very individuals and groups who are the victims of systemic injustice.

### **System Justification and “Pseudo-Conservatism”**

By linking system-justifying ideology to basic epistemic and existential needs, SJT not only explains why conservatives usually tend to endorse ideologies that justify the status quo, but it also helps to explain why conservatives sometimes become ardent critics of the status quo. The tendency of self-identified conservatives to sometimes support radical political movements has long puzzled social scientists to the point that such individuals have been branded “pseudo-conservatives” (Adorno et al., [1950](#); Hofstadter, [1954](#)).

SJT helps to resolve this puzzle by explaining that conservatives’ dispositionally higher epistemic and existential needs usually lead them to prefer the tried-and-true status quo because they are more confident it will provide the structure and security they seek compared to the “social experiments” proposed by progressive reformers. However, SJT predicts that if the status quo appears to be failing to maintain an acceptable level of social order, then conservatives’ unmet epistemic and existential needs will motivate them to seek to replace the status quo with some more structured, orderly alternative (e.g., Friesen et al., [2014](#)). Thus, SJT indicates that “pseudo-conservatives” who critique the status quo may be authentic

conservatives in their underlying motivational profile, but they have simply lost faith in the current sociopolitical system's ability to provide the security and order that they especially seek.

Tellingly, even when conservatives challenge the status quo, they usually do not advocate replacing it with some untested innovation; rather, they seek to restore some traditional social structure that they see as more orderly and authentic than the present. This nostalgic spirit of conservatism was eloquently captured by conservative writer Andrew Sullivan ([2006](#)) who wrote, "All conservatism begins with loss" (p. 9). Indeed, conservatism often involves both resisting proposed changes to the system that threaten to lose valued aspects of the social order while also seeking to restore cherished aspects of the past social order that have already been lost. The voice of conservatism that focuses on restoring values that have been lost may sound system-critical because it unfavorably compares the present to the past. However, this restorative program can be seen as an attempt to defend the true essence of the system, particularly its order-conferring properties, from modernizing corruptions.

### **System-Justifying Function of Stereotypes**

Another major contribution of SJT involves illuminating how stereotypes do ideological work to justify the system's legitimacy (Kay et al., [2007](#)). Specifically, SJT holds that group stereotypes function to rationalize the unequal distribution of social groups into high-status versus low-status roles, which serves to uphold the perceived legitimacy of the sociopolitical system. In the face of evidence of group inequalities people maintain the belief that their system is justified by stereotyping high-status groups positively and low-status groups negatively on agentic traits because these traits are considered causally relevant to success and thus provide a rationalization for their unequal status.

For example, subordinate ethnic groups tend to be stereotyped as possessing traits such as laziness that serve to explain and justify their subordinate status. However, the system justification motive also leads people to

stereotype dominant groups negatively and subordinate groups positively on communal traits because such traits are considered causally irrelevant to success, and thus attributing them to subordinate groups maintains a sense of the overall fairness of the system by suggesting low-status groups experience compensating rewards in other domains of life.

To test the hypothesis that the system justification motive promotes this form of group stereotyping, Jost et al. ([2005](#)) manipulated activation of the system justification motive by varying Israeli participants' exposure to information that threatened their sociopolitical system and then assessed the effects on their endorsement of stereotypes about low- and high-status groups. Participants rated Ashkenazi Israelis, a relatively high-status group, and Sephardic Israelis, a relatively low-status group, on a variety of agentic (e.g., responsible, intelligent, ambitious) and communal traits (e.g., traditional, friendly, valuing of family). Consistent with the hypothesis, the high-status Ashkenazim were rated significantly higher on agentic traits but lower on communal traits than the low-status Sephardim. Moreover, these group stereotypes were particularly pronounced in the system-threat condition, which indicates that endorsing the stereotypes functions to restore the perceived legitimacy of the system.

Ambivalent sexism is a particularly powerful example of a system-justifying ideology that stereotypes men and women as being ideally suited to separate spheres, with men naturally possessing agentic traits relevant to high-status roles in the public sphere and women naturally possessing communal traits relevant to caregiving roles in the private sphere (Glick & Fiske, [2001](#)). Because men are overrepresented in agentic roles (e.g., management) while women are overrepresented in communal roles (e.g., childcare), people stereotype men as possessing more agentic traits, such as intelligence, and they stereotype women as possessing more communal traits, such as sensitivity. Ambivalent sexism also applies positive but patronizing benevolent stereotypes to women who fulfill traditional communal caregiving roles and highly negative hostile stereotypes to women who pursue nontraditional agentic roles. Consistent with the idea that

benevolent sexism is a system-justifying ideology, Jost and Kay ([2005](#)) found that, when they experimentally activated benevolent sexist stereotypes, women perceived status quo gender inequalities as more justified than they did in a control condition where these stereotypes were not activated.

## **Dual-Process Model of Ideological Motivation**

While many valuable insights have emerged through examining social motivational processes that various system-justifying ideologies share in common, other important work has documented the distinctive social motivational profiles and dynamics of two of the major varieties of ideology—namely, authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (Duckitt, [2001](#)). Authoritarianism encompasses variation in ideological dispositions to follow (versus resist) traditional authorities and norms while social dominance orientation encompasses variation in ideological dispositions to promote (versus challenge) group-based status hierarchies. Indeed, authoritarianism and social dominance orientation account for unique additive variance in predicting people's scores on measures of liberal and conservative attitudes (Wilson & Sibley, [2013](#)). They also have distinct personality correlates, with higher authoritarianism correlating with higher conscientiousness and lower openness while higher social dominance correlates with lower agreeableness (Sibley & Duckitt, [2008](#)).

The dual-process model hypothesizes that a person's ideological position on each of these dimensions is a motivated response to their underlying worldview. Specifically, the model indicates that identification with high (versus low) authoritarianism is rooted in a tendency to view the world as dangerous (versus safe), whereas high (versus low) social dominance ideology is rooted in a tendency to view social groups as competitive (versus cooperative) (Duckitt, [2001](#)). The theoretical background and key findings related to these distinct types of system-justifying ideology will be examined.

## **Authoritarianism and Perceptions of a Dangerous World**

Authoritarianism entails a tendency to favor a strong normative social order as a bulwark against potentially dangerous and chaotic forces (Duckitt, [2001](#)). Psychologists and political scientists have long recognized that a major fault line in sociopolitical ideology centers on variability in people's inclination to defer to authorities and aggressively enforce traditional norms and rules (Adorno et al., [1950](#)). Indeed, analyses of people's responses to four questions about values to instill in children have found that those who emphasize qualities like obedience and good manners over self-reliance and curiosity tend to have more conservative views on issues ranging from national security to social inclusion (Hetherington & Weiler, [2009](#)).

Altemeyer ([1988](#)) developed and validated a modern measure of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) that has been shown to be a composite of three distinct, positively correlated dimensions: a conservatism dimension that involves submission towards established authorities; an authoritarian dimension that involves punitiveness towards groups whom authorities designate as legitimate targets; and a traditionalism dimension that involves adherence to conventional norms (see also Duckitt et al., [2010](#)). RWA scores predict attitudes and behaviors reflecting these three dimensions. For instance, relevant to the authoritarian dimension, RWA scores correlate positively with willingness to participate in government-sanctioned poses to oppress a variety of targets, including political radicals, LGBT+ people, and abortion providers (Altemeyer, [1988](#)).

## **Motivational Roots of Authoritarianism**

The dual-process model hypothesizes that authoritarianism is rooted in a worldview that emphasizes danger and the risk of social disorder (Duckitt, [2001](#)). Authoritarians are motivated to seek strong leadership and strict social norms to defend against the dangerous conditions and disorder that they perceive in the world (Duckitt, [2001](#)). Several lines of evidence support the hypothesis that authoritarianism is a motivated reaction to

perceiving a dangerous world. For instance, RWA scores are positively correlated with endorsement of beliefs that dangers are prevalent (Altemeyer, [1988](#)). Authoritarianism also tends to increase when dangers become more salient.

A provocative set of studies by Sales ([1972](#), [1973](#)) showed that population-level rates of authoritarian behaviors, such as conversions to religious orthodoxy, increase when there is widespread economic threat.

Experimentally inducing people to think about social disorder also increases authoritarianism (Duckitt & Fisher, [2003](#)). For example, Altemeyer ([1988](#)) found that participants who were manipulated to imagine a future in which radicals created widespread social disruption through violent antigovernment protests subsequently showed higher RWA scores than participants who were led to imagine a more quiescent future. The finding that political protests can backfire because the social disruption that they create triggers an increase in bystanders' authoritarianism highlights an important psychological barrier to the success of movements that challenge the status quo.

## **Socio-Ecological Perspectives on Authoritarianism**

Other work rooted in the dual-process framework has taken a socio-ecological perspective to explore possible adaptive functions of authoritarian motivation. This work speculates that the traditional moral norms that authoritarians seek to enforce may function to discourage behaviors, such as sexual promiscuity, that transmit pathogens (Inbar & Pizarro, [2016](#)). Supporting this provocative hypothesis, research shows that cultures in pathogen-rich environments tend to have higher levels of traditionalist attitudes (Tybur et al., [2016](#)), and individuals with more pathogen-avoidant motivation, as indexed by higher disgust sensitivity, tend to be more conservative (Inbar et al., [2009](#), [2012](#)). In particular, disgust sensitivity is correlated with the authoritarian-traditionalist dimension of conservatism but not with the social dominance dimension of conservatism, which supports the discriminant validity of these constructs (Tybur et al., [2016](#)).

## **Authoritarian Themes in Life Narratives**

To the extent that authoritarianism is rooted in a worldview that emphasizes the need for strong moral rules to provide security against disorder, then this worldview may influence how authoritarians make sense of events in their own personal lives. Indeed, McAdams et al. ([2013](#)) hypothesized that, when authoritarians tell autobiographical stories, they tend to emphasize Augustinian themes of acquiring self-discipline to gain control over their chaotic impulses and avoid temptations, reflecting their wariness towards a dangerous world, whereas non-authoritarians emphasize themes of exploration and self-discovery, reflecting their openness to a world that they perceive as benign and inviting. To test this, McAdams et al. ([2013](#)) coded participants' life narratives and found that, as hypothesized, authoritarians' stories emphasized self-regulation themes that described struggling to "control, discipline, manage, restrain, protect, or preserve the self," whereas non-authoritarians emphasized self-exploration themes that involved "expanding, discovering, articulating, or fulfilling the self" (p. 201).

## **The Question of Left-Wing Authoritarianism**

From Stalinism and Maoism in the 20th century to the Chavez regime in the 21st century, historical evidence shows that authoritarianism also exists on the left. Indeed, social scientists have noted illiberal tendencies in a variety of left-wing social movements (Ellis, [1998](#)). Such observations highlight the need to investigate the psychological bases of left-wing manifestations of authoritarianism. Despite interest in the topic, left-wing authoritarianism has long been an elusive phenomenon in research on sociopolitical attitudes (Altemeyer, [1988](#); Stone, [1980](#)).

However, the discovery that the RWA measure consists of distinct authoritarian, conservative, and traditionalist dimensions suggests that left-wing authoritarianism could be conceptualized as an ideological profile that is high in authoritarianism but low in traditionalism (Duckitt et al., [2010](#)).

Building on this insight, research has recently found that liberals endorse authoritarian views more than conservatives when those views are expressed in a distinctly anti-traditionalist voice—that is, “The only way our country can get through the crisis ahead is to get rid of our ‘traditional’ values, put some tough leaders in power who oppose those values, and silence the troublemakers spreading bad (and so-called ‘traditional’) ideas” (Conway et al., [2018](#)). In future research it will be interesting to explore similarities and distinctions in the worldviews and social-cognitive motivations of left-wing versus right-wing authoritarians.

## **Social Dominance Motivation and Perceptions of a Competitive World**

Attitudes regarding group-based hierarchies represent the second major ideological fault line in the dual-process model. Insights into the motivational foundations of group-based hierarchies derive from social dominance theory (SDT; Sidanius & Pratto, [1999](#)), a powerful theoretical framework which emphasizes that hierarchies based on age, gender, ethnicity and class are recurrent organizational structures in human societies.

Groups at the top of these hierarchies enjoy greater access to financial, social, and cultural and symbolic capital, which affords them control over sociopolitical institutions such as the criminal justice system, markets, and electoral politics, in order to ensure that these institutions function to create, maintain, and enhance their hierarchical position (Sidanius & Pratto, [1999](#)). SDT thus explains why subordinate groups are subjected to disproportionately higher surveillance, arrest, prosecution, harsher sentencing, and lower educational opportunities compared to dominant groups (Sidanius & Pratto, [1999](#)).

To explain why group-based hierarchies are a recurrent feature of societies, SDT posits that there is a fundamental human predisposition to prefer hierarchical structures (Sidanius & Pratto, [1999](#)). However, SDT proposes that this motivation varies depending on individual and situational factors (Chiao et al., [2009](#); Sidanius & Pratto, [1999](#)). Social dominance orientation

(SDO) measures individual differences in this motivation by asking participants to report their level of agreement with statements about the acceptability of group-based hierarchies—namely, “Inferior groups should stay in their place” (Kteily et al., [2012](#); Pratto et al., [1994](#)). Higher SDO scores correlate with stronger endorsement of hierarchy-enhancing ideologies that justify group-based inequalities.

For example, higher SDO scores are associated with greater belief in meritocratic ideology, which attributes inequalities between individuals or groups to merit, and greater endorsement of stereotypes that attribute status differences between groups to inherent qualities rather than to structural inequities (Pratto et al., [1994](#)).

Individuals who belong to higher-status groups, such as men, ethnic majorities, and heterosexuals, tend to be reliably higher in SDO than those at the bottom of status hierarchies, such as women, ethnic minorities, and LGBT+ individuals (Sidanius & Pratto, [1999](#)). Individuals’ SDO scores also shift depending on whether they are experimentally prompted to think of a high-status or a low-status ingroup to which they belong (Sidanius & Pratto, [1999](#)).

## **Motivational Roots of Social Dominance**

The underlying worldview of people who are high in social dominance motivation is distinct from the worldview of people who are high in authoritarianism (Duckitt, [2001](#)). Specifically, high SDO individuals view the world as a competitive struggle for access to a limited supply of status, power, and resources. Consistent with this, evidence shows that high SDO individuals are more reactive to intergroup competition cues.

For example, when intergroup competition is salient high SDO individuals engage in more automatic us-versus-them thinking (Pratto & Shih, [2000](#)). This zero-sum competitive worldview also shapes how high SDO individuals respond to relevant social issues. For example, high (versus low) SDO individuals are more likely to express zero-sum beliefs about the impact of

immigrants on the economic opportunities for non-immigrants—such as “immigrants are taking our jobs”—which motivates them to oppose policies that might empower immigrants (Esses et al., [2001](#)).

## **Zero-Sum Perceptions and Conflict Over Social Change**

Other works inspired by SDT have found that members of socially dominant groups tend to have a zero-sum belief that they experience losses when subordinate groups experience gains (Eibach & Keegan, [2006](#); Norton & Somers, [2011](#)). Norton and Somers ([2011](#)) found particularly powerful evidence for such a zero-sum perception of intergroup relations. When participants were asked to estimate how much discrimination Black Americans and White Americans experienced in each decade from the 1960s to the present, White participants reported a steep decline in discrimination against Black Americans and a corresponding increase in discrimination against White Americans over this period (Norton & Somers, [2011](#)).

By contrast, Black participants perceived a less steep decline in discrimination against Black Americans and a constant relatively low level of discrimination against White Americans. Strikingly, White Americans perceived present-day discrimination against White Americans to be higher than current discrimination against Black Americans and comparable to discrimination that they believed Black Americans experienced in the 1960s.

This zero-sum tendency to believe that gains in inclusion for subordinate groups come at the expense of traditionally dominant groups may explain why members of dominant groups are sometimes drawn to populist movements that focus on restoring an idealized past and voice concerns about social decline, whereas subordinate groups are drawn to movements that focus on progress toward hoped-for ideals (Eibach & Ehrlinger, [2006](#); Eibach & Purdue-Vaughns, [2009](#)).

## **Ideological Reactions to Threat**

Further insights into the motivational bases of ideology have emerged from an influential line of theory and research that conceptualizes attachment to

ideology as a strategy to manage anxieties that people experience in response to psychosocial threats. There is extensive evidence that people's attitudes shift to a more extreme position in line with their ideology in response to a variety of threats including threats to certainty (McGregor et al., [2001](#); Van den Bos, [2009](#)), meaning (Heine et al., [2006](#)), control (Kay & Eibach, [2013](#)), mortality (Landau et al., [2004](#)), and identity (Hogg, [2014](#)). An integrative model proposes that threats activate the behavioral inhibition system, which produces an anxious state of suspended action (Jonas et al., [2014](#)).

To cope with this anxious inhibition, people are proximally motivated to seize upon ideologies that emphasize order and structure to compensate for their own sense of diminished agency. This defensive response to threat should promote adherence to system-justifying and authoritarian ideologies. However, another coping strategy involves overcoming inhibition by activating the behavioral approach system through embracing an abstract ideology that provides ideals that one can enthusiastically strive towards (Jonas et al., [2014](#)).

These ideals could take the form either of the traditional values associated with ideologies of the right or the progressive values associated with ideologies of the left. To the extent that this approach-focused coping strategy is activated by threat, then threat can lead not just conservatives but also liberals to become more zealously committed to their respective ideological values, thus enhancing the polarization between them.

Consistent with this prediction, researchers found that high authoritarians and low authoritarians became more polarized from each other in their attitudes towards immigrants when they were exposed to the threat of thinking about death compared to a non-threatened control condition. The mortality threat shifted each group to a more extreme position in line with their distinctive values, with high authoritarians becoming more anti-immigrant and low authoritarians more pro-immigrant (Weise et al., [2012](#)).

# Moral Psychology Perspectives on Ideological Polarization

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Although the social-cognitive approach to ideological conflict has generated important insights into the motivational dynamics that draw people to system-justifying, authoritarian, and social dominance ideologies, other insights have emerged by taking a cultural psychology perspective that considers how the left and right sides of the ideological divide might reflect distinct moral sub-cultures. This approach recognizes that many ideological conflicts are rooted in differences in how liberals and conservatives define the proper domain and scope of morality (Hunter, [1991](#)).

In particular, moral foundations theory (MFT) traces the conflict between liberals and conservatives to differences in the core values that guide their moral judgments (Haidt & Graham, [2009](#)). MFT emphasizes that people's moral judgments are influenced by a set of individualizing ethics—care and fairness—that are grouped together because they regulate how individuals treat one another, and a set of binding ethics—ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and sacredness and purity—that are grouped together because they regulate how individuals are bound into relationships or groups (Haidt & Graham, [2009](#)).

MFT posits that ideological communities within cultures differ in their relative emphasis on these distinct ethical domains. Specifically, binding ethics tend to be a stronger foundation of moral judgment for conservatives than for liberals, whereas individualizing ethics are relatively strong foundations for both liberals and conservatives. Consistent with these predictions, research using a variety of methods finds that, when liberals decide whether an act is right or wrong, they tend only to take into account whether someone was harmed or treated unfairly, whereas conservatives also take into account whether the act involved disloyalty, disrespect for authority, or impurity and desecration (Graham et al., [2009](#); McAdams et al., [2008](#)). New work suggested that the binding ethics may not represent a distinct moral domain because people who are morally concerned about

loyalty, respect, and purity typically construe violations of these ethics as causing harm to persons, and thus these ethics may ultimately be reducible to an ethics of harm avoidance (e.g., Schein et al., [2015](#)). Under this analysis, conservatives may not have a distinct moral psychology from liberals but rather conservatives may view disloyal, disrespectful, or impure acts as causing harm, whereas liberals may view such acts as relatively harmless.

## **Integrating Social-Cognitive and Moral Psychology Perspectives**

Although motivated social-cognition and moral psychology are sometimes framed as distinct, even conflicting, approaches to understanding the roots of ideology, there has been constructive work to integrate these approaches. Indeed, Cornwell and Higgins ([2013](#)) tested an integrative model in which a social-cognitive variable—prevention-focus versus promotion-focus—determines an individual's motivation to emphasize binding moral foundations, and these binding foundations in turn determine whether they self-identify with conservative ideology.

Prevention-focus is a vigilant motivational orientation to prevent losses and avoid potential threats, which broadly fits the motivational profile of conservative, system-justifying ideologies according to both SJT and the dual-process model's theory of authoritarianism.

By contrast, promotion-focus is a motivational orientation to actively seek gains and pursue growth goals, which broadly fits the motivational profile of liberal, system-challenging ideologies according to those same theories. Cornwell and Higgins ([2013](#)) made a useful contribution by proposing that this link from self-regulatory orientations to political ideologies might be mediated by a more proximal link to moral foundations. Explaining this link, they hypothesized that the binding moral values of loyalty, respect, and sacredness provide constraining rules and normative “oughts” that offer the guidance that prevention-focused people seek in order to pursue their vigilant goals, whereas those same binding values would likely seem too stifling for promotion-focused people as they pursue personal growth. Consistent with these hypotheses, Cornwell and Higgins ([2013](#)) found that

chronic or experimentally induced prevention-focus led people to endorse binding ethics and these binding ethics in turn predicted greater endorsement of conservative ideology compared to chronic or induced promotion-focus.

This work is a valuable demonstration that motivated social cognition and moral psychology provide compatible insights into the psychological foundations of ideology. Furthermore, to the extent that in this model binding ethics are the more proximal determinant of sociopolitical ideology this suggests that there may be routes through binding ethics to conservative ideology that are not rooted in threat-avoidant epistemic and existential motives, even if threat avoidance is one major pathway to conservatism (Cornwell & Higgins, [2014](#)).

## **Motivated Information Processing and Ideological Polarization**

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Understanding ideological polarization requires not just understanding the factors that determine which ideology a person is likely to adopt but also how their adopted ideology then shapes their experience of the world, particularly their interpretations of social issues and their perceptions of their ideological adversaries. Social psychological research on this topic indicates that people are biased to seek out and interpret information in ways that tend to reinforce their ideological leanings and exaggerate their ideological distance from their adversaries. Reviewing this work provides valuable insights into the dynamics of ideological polarization.

### **Selective Exposure**

Selective exposure involves people self-segregating into ideologically homogeneous social networks or selectively attending to information that supports their ideological leanings. People's tendency to affiliate selectively with others who are ideologically similar to them is seen in online communities where, for example, websites link significantly more to sites

that share the website's ideological leanings (Sunstein, [2001](#)). It is also seen in offline communities, where, for example, people geographically cluster into ideologically segregated conservative and liberal neighborhoods (Massey et al., [2009](#)).

The tendency to selectively seek out information sources that support one's views and avoid information on the opposing side is also a robust phenomenon, and this bias is particularly strong for sociopolitical issues (Hart et al., [2009](#)). Indeed, people will even forgo the chance to win money in order to avoid reading information coming from an opposing ideological camp (Frimer et al., [2017](#)). The bias to prefer congenial information sources over uncongenial sources appears to be a motivated phenomenon that people exhibit more strongly under conditions that promote belief defensiveness (Hart et al., [2009](#)).

There has been especially keen interest in how social media may affect ideological segregation. A sophisticated analysis of Twitter users' retweets found that although there was an overall bias to retweet more posts from one's ideological allies than from adversaries, this bias emerged particularly if the content was an explicitly political topic and not for tweets about other current events (Barberá et al., [2015](#)). There was also an intriguing tendency for exchanges about certain issues, such as a school shooting, to begin as apolitical discussions that were retweeted across ideological lines, but then become politicized and segregated into ideologically homogeneous transmission networks. Of note, conservatives engaged in more ideologically biased retweeting than liberals.

The tendency for people to cluster into ideologically segregated information networks should tend to promote ideological polarization because decades of research have documented that discussing issues with like-minded others leads people to develop more extreme opinions in whatever direction they were originally leaning (e.g., Myers & Bishop, [1970](#)). Building on prior work on group polarization, Schkade et al. ([2007](#)) hypothesized that, to the extent that neighbors are ideologically similar, discussing political issues with one's neighbors is likely to increase polarization. To test this, Schkade et al.

([2007](#)) held political discussion groups in a predominantly liberal city and a predominantly conservative city. When the researchers surveyed participants before and after these group discussions, they found that individuals from the liberal city became even more liberal, whereas individuals from the conservative city became even more conservative than each had been before those discussions.

To counteract the echo chamber of group polarization, people are often encouraged to expose themselves to opinions from the opposing ideological camp. The rationale is that if people were exposed to opinions from both sides, this should moderate their positions and thereby reduce polarization.

An experiment tested this by assigning a group of participants to follow a Twitter bot that exposed them to opinions from the opposite ideological camp (Bail et al., [2018](#)). However, contrary to the hope that exposure to opposing viewpoints would moderate people's views, after four weeks of being fed information from the opposing side, liberal and conservative participants were even more polarized from each other than in a control condition.

The recommendation that ideological polarization could be reduced by forcing people to step out of their echo chambers to hear opinions from the opposing side assumes that people passively absorb whatever messages they are exposed to. However, in reality people tend to process information through motivational filters that allow them to readily absorb ideologically consistent information but actively keep out inconsistent information. Some of these more active information-processing biases are discussed in the section on ideologically biased skepticism.

## **Ideologically Biased Skepticism**

People tend to be motivated skeptics when they reason about evidence and arguments relevant to their own side versus the opposing side in an ideological conflict (e.g., Gampa et al., [2019](#); Taber & Lodge, [2006](#)). Specifically, people adjust their standards, showing credulity towards evidence that favors their side but skepticism towards evidence that favors

the opposing side, as in the case of a person who reflexively dismisses as “fake news” any reports that challenge their views while readily questionable sources that align with their views. A related bias involves motivated correction, where people are biased to correct their initial interpretations of evidence if those interpretations conflict with their overarching ideology but not if those interpretations support their ideology (Skitka et al., [2005](#)).

Evidence that ideologically skewed information processing is a motivated, belief-defensive process comes from research that shows that this bias is reduced if people are self-affirmed, a standard intervention to reduce motivated reasoning (Cohen et al., [2007](#)). This finding that self-affirmation reduces biased skepticism not only supports the hypothesis that this bias is a motivated process but also suggests that self-affirmation could be used as a tool to foster more constructive political engagement across ideological lines. Perhaps many people might benefit from engaging in a brief self-affirmation to check their biases before they read the daily news.

## **Value Tradeoffs and Complex Ideological Reasoning**

The research reviewed thus far indicates that, when individuals from opposing ideological camps think about issues relevant to their conflict, they tend to oversimplify those issues by seizing on evidence that supports their side and dismissing evidence that supports the opposing side.

However, if an issue brings two or more of the individual’s own values into opposition, they tend to engage in more integratively complex reasoning about that issue as they seek to strike a balance between the opposing values that they see at stake in that issue (Tetlock, [1986](#); Tetlock et al., [1994](#)). For example, to the extent that an open borders immigration policy creates conflict between the conservative value of economic efficiency and the conservative value of social order then a conservative individual should tend to reason in an integratively complex, balanced way when trying to decide whether to support the policy.

Similarly, when a cultural minority's traditional religious practices restrict how women express themselves in public, this brings the liberal values of multiculturalism and gender equality into conflict, which may lead a liberal to reason in integratively complex ways when they decide whether to support a policy to regulate this traditional practice. So, while ideological conflict between people tends to promote more biased reasoning, ideological conflict within a person promotes more balanced reasoning.

## **Overestimation of Ideological Polarization**

Social psychologists have not only studied biases that produce ideological polarization, but they have also examined biases in how people perceive the ideological divide itself. This work finds that people tend to overestimate the magnitude of the polarization of the average members of opposing ideological camps.

For example, Americans overestimate the extremity of the conservatism of the average Republican voter and the liberalism of the average Democratic voter (Westfall et al., [2015](#)). Furthermore, people overestimate the extremity of the views of their ideological opponents more than they overestimate the extremity of the views of their ideological allies (Westfall et al., [2015](#)). Also, individuals with more extreme views especially tend to overestimate the polarization between their side and the opposing side in ideological conflicts (Van Boven et al., [2012](#)).

Overestimation of ideological polarization is partly due to people's egocentric failure to realize that, when it comes to a complex, multi-dimensional issue, members of the opposing side might be focusing on a different dimension of the issue than members of their own side, which leads them to overestimate the gap between the opposing sides on whatever value dimension their side focuses on (Chambers et al., [2006](#)).

For example, the abortion issue could be construed by focusing on its implications for the value of life or its implications for reproductive freedom. To the extent that pro-life advocates construe the abortion issue as

being primarily about the value of life then they may assume that because pro-choice advocates disagree with them on abortion they must not value life. Similarly, to the extent that pro-choice advocates construe the abortion issue as being primarily about reproductive freedom then they may assume that because pro-life advocates disagree with them on abortion they must not value freedom. In reality, the average pro-choice advocate values life more than pro-life individuals give them credit for, and the average pro-life advocate values reproductive freedom more than pro-choice individuals give them credit for. The opposition between pro-life and pro-choice is not as much a difference in their fundamental values as each side thinks; rather, it is a difference in how they construe those values as being relevant to the specific issue.

Research on moral foundations theory makes a similar point about how egocentric construals of issue conflicts can lead people to misunderstand the other side in ideological conflicts. Specifically, Haidt and Graham (2009) hypothesized that to the extent that liberals have a narrower range of ethical considerations, encompassing individualizing ethics more than binding ethics, whereas conservatives see issues through the lens of both ethical codes, liberals may fail to understand the ethical conflicts conservatives experience on many social and moral issues. Haidt and Graham (2009) referred to this as “moral colorblindness of the left.”

For example, if liberals view the issue of LGBT+ rights from their own egocentric vantage point, they may assume that conservatives’ opposition to LGBT+ rights means they must not value fairness, failing to recognize that conservatives who oppose same-sex marriage may value fairness but on this topic conservatives’ concerns about fairness are trumped by their concerns about sacredness.

To test this, Graham et al. (2009) asked participants to guess how the typical liberal and typical conservative would answer moral foundations questions, and these estimates were then compared to the actual moral foundations scores of the average liberal and conservative. Consistent with the “colorblindness of the left” hypothesis the results showed that liberals

systematically underestimated conservatives' support for the ethics of care and fairness.

## **Moralization of Ideological Conflict**

Another important line of work examines how ideological polarization tends to be magnified when the opposing ideologies are rooted in moral convictions (Skitka, [2010](#)). To the extent that people report that their sociopolitical attitudes are based on moral convictions they tend to be more intolerant of others who disagree with them (Skitka & Morgan, [2014](#)).

Specifically, people with strong moral convictions distance themselves more from ideological opponents, and they are willing to take extreme actions if necessary to promote their views compared to individuals who have equally strong attitudes that are not rooted in moral convictions (Skitka et al., [2005](#); Skitka & Houston, [2001](#)). While this tendency of moral convictions to promote ideological intolerance and extremity is of concern, it is important to note that moral convictions also have important prosocial consequences, such as promoting higher levels of civic engagement (Skitka & Houston, [2001](#)).

## **Leveraging Insights to Bridge Ideological Divides**

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Merely exposing people to views from the opposite side of the ideological divide is insufficient to reduce polarization and actually may backfire if it triggers them to engage in biased processing of the information (Bail et al., [2018](#); Taber & Lodge, [2006](#)). The tendency of motivated processing of political information to drive people to ideological extremes might seem to indicate that the only way to reduce ideological polarization is to put people on a “news fast” where they avoid engagement with political information for extended periods.

Supporting this notion, a recent study found that participants who were experimentally assigned to deactivate their Facebook account for 4 weeks leading up to an election were less informed about political news but also

showed less polarized political opinions compared to those who continued using Facebook (Allcott et al., [2019](#)). Encouraging people to go on “news fasts” seems like a rather desperate remedy for ideological polarization and has the very significant drawback of reducing people’s political knowledge. Fortunately, theory and research on the social motivational and moral roots of people’s ideological attachments and the information-processing biases that maintain ideologies offer a number of more constructive solutions.

One recommendation derives from research on value pluralism and integrative complexity (Tetlock, [1986](#)). That work suggests that listening carefully to the voices of individuals who are personally committed to values that straddle the opposing sides of an ideological divide might provide integratively complex solutions that harmonize these conflicting values rather than seizing upon simplistic solutions that champion one side’s values at the cost of disrespecting the other side. Individuals who have a personal commitment to values aligned with each of the opposing sides in an ideological conflict may help the opposing parties to move past seeing the conflict in an either/or frame to see the possibilities of both/and compromises.

Theory and research on the system justification motive could also be leveraged to promote more constructive political engagement and persuasion across ideological battle lines. For example, insights into the system-justification motive provide tools for framing issues in ways that could promote greater support for reforming aspects of the system (Feygina et al., [2010](#); Friesen et al., [2019](#)). Specifically, SJT predicts that if reforms to the system are framed as being necessary to preserve and maintain the essential properties of the system, this frame can convert people who have strong system-justification needs to support the cause of reform (Feygina et al., [2010](#); Gaucher et al., [2018](#)).

For example, Feygina et al. ([2010](#)) found that framing environmental reform policies as necessary to “preserve and protect the American way of life” increased support for pro-environment reforms among Americans who were high in system-justification motivation compared to a control

condition that did not present a system-preserving frame for pro-environmental policies.

Theory and research on the moral foundations of ideology suggests other ways to reframe issues to promote more constructive engagement across ideological divides. This work shows that because people tend to construe sociopolitical issues in light of their own particular moral convictions, when liberals and conservatives try to persuade each other on issues of ideological conflict, they often fail to frame their arguments in ways that will appeal to the distinctive moral convictions of their opponents (Feinberg & Willer, [2015](#)).

For example, when liberals frame arguments to persuade conservatives to support same-sex marriage rights, they fail to emphasize how conservative values might be promoted by same-sex marriage, and instead they emphasize liberal values and even attack conservative values relevant to the issue. However, research shows that conservatives would be more likely to support same-sex marriage rights if they received persuasive arguments that emphasized how same-sex marriage is consistent with conservative values than if they read arguments that framed same-sex marriage exclusively in terms of liberal values (Feinberg & Willer, [2015](#)).

These findings highlight the importance of considering issues from the moral perspective of the other side and framing persuasive messages in ways that respect and engage their distinctive values (Day et al., [2014](#)). Finally, recent research has explored methods to promote wiser reasoning about ideological conflicts. This research defines wise reasoning as involving the epistemic humility to recognize that one's understanding is only partial, a willingness to consider other viewpoints, and an appreciation that circumstances may change (Grossmann & Dorfman, [2019](#); Oakes et al., [2019](#)).

When people engage in such wise reasoning, they exhibit less polarization in their evaluation of their side and the opposing side in ideological conflicts (Brienza, [2017](#); Grossmann & Brienza, [2018](#); Grossmann et al., [2020](#)). A key

insight from this research is that detaching one's ego from an issue of ideological conflict promotes wiser reasoning about that issue. For instance, when people are experimentally induced to consider an issue of ideological conflict from a neutral third party's vantage point, this leads them to reason more wisely about the issue (Kross & Grossmann, [2012](#)). The intriguing implication is that revitalizing practices for cultivating wisdom within the culture may help to address problems of ideological polarization (Grossmann et al., [2020](#)).

## **Conclusion: Promoting Ideological Diversity Within Social Psychology**

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Social psychology offers valuable insights into the social motivational dynamics of ideology that could be applied to help address problems related to ideological polarization. However, for social psychologists the struggle to bridge ideological divisions may need to begin in their home discipline. Surveys of contemporary social psychologists find that the majority self-identify as liberals, particularly on social issues (Inbar & Lammers, [2012](#)).

Furthermore, conservative and moderate social psychologists report that they fear that their mostly liberal colleagues would discriminate against them because of their political views. Indeed, some social psychologists admit that they are at least somewhat likely to discriminate against conservative colleagues, such as preferentially hiring a liberal job candidate over an equally qualified conservative (Inbar & Lammers, [2012](#)).

Such intolerance not only transgresses humane ideals, but it also raises concerns that theory and research in the discipline might be skewed by the overrepresentation of liberal viewpoints. Ideological assumptions can potentially influence what social phenomena researchers choose to study, the hypotheses they develop to explain those phenomena, the methods they design to test those hypotheses, and the conclusions that they draw from their findings (Duarte et al., [2015](#)). In addition to the underrepresentation of conservative voices within social psychology, others have noted a relative

lack of scholarship representing a more liberationist perspective (e.g., Lott, [2016](#); Salter & Adams, [2013](#)). These critics suggest that psychological science is biased to take a center-left, meliorist approach in its analyses of social issues and interventions, and these critics highlight a need for more vigorous engagement with revolutionary ideological frameworks.

The evidence of ideological narrowness within social psychology (Inbar & Lammers, [2012](#)), and within academia more generally (Gross, [2013](#)), has inspired lively discussion about potential strategies to promote more ideologically diverse and inclusive scholarship (e.g., Duarte et al., [2015](#); Inbar & Lammers, [2015](#); Nisbett, [2015](#); Washburn et al., [2015](#)). If such efforts by social psychologists to put theoretical insights into practice within the home discipline prove successful, they may produce a model that other communities could follow to bridge ideological divisions.

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