

Partisan Polarization, Social Identity, and Deliberative Democracy in the United States

Ryan Strickler

This project illustrates the impact of partisan polarization on attitudes towards deliberative ideals of political discourse. It speaks to the potential for the U.S. to establish a more deliberative democracy. Deliberative theorists and empirical researchers idealize political discussion characterized by reciprocity, inclusiveness, and rational argumentation, positing that it leads to benefits such as greater legitimacy, better and more consensual decisions, and learning and empathy for those who participate. Researchers, though, have failed to fully explore the *conditions* under which one is willing to adopt the deliberative ideals when engaging in political discussion.

This project makes an important contribution to this regard, assessing how partisanship and polarization impact the public's propensity to adopt an attitude of reciprocity (or mutual respect) towards political decision making. Drawing on social identity theory, the project conceptualizes partisan attachment as containing interrelated, yet separate ideological and a social identity dimensions. Through a series of survey experiments, the primary findings show that partisan social identity attachment—in other words, the extent to which one views being a Democrat or being a Republican as an important part of “who one is”—weakens one commitment to reciprocity in a variety of ways. For instance, partisans with strong social identity attachments are more likely to heed party cues, as opposed to argumentative substance, in considering whether to afford reciprocity towards political disagreement. Partisans with strong social identity attachments are also less likely to support displays of reciprocity by an inparty political representative. The same effects, however, are not present for partisans with strong ideological commitments to their party. The effects, moreover, are not weaker for partisans who have regular social contact with outparty members.

Recent research shows that the partisan public has increasingly polarized not based on ideology or issue positions, but based on growing partisan social identity salience. Thus, this project shows that mass “social” polarization is creating a fundamental barrier to the possibility of a more deliberative democracy in the United States.