

## DO SOMETHING ABOUT TOXIC POLARIZATION

### What is toxic polarization?

There are three types of polarization that help us define and understand toxic polarization. *Ideological polarization* notes how beliefs and values diverge between groups. *Affective polarization* describes the degree of feelings of warmth or contempt a group feels towards the other side. *Perceptual polarization* is the degree to which each side views the other side as extreme.<sup>1</sup>

Though some polarization is normal, toxic polarization occurs when there are elevated levels of contempt for those with opposite beliefs and strong love and attachment to the beliefs of one's own group. It creates a state of intense, chronic polarization that can lead to the belief that the other side is the enemy and differences are irreconcilable.<sup>2</sup> These beliefs become more about identity instead of differences of opinion.<sup>3</sup>

In a study of political polarization in the US, Beyond Conflict found three psychological factors that fuel polarization: dehumanization, dislike, and disagreement. The more group members believe the other group dehumanizes, dislikes, and disagrees with them the stronger the polarization.<sup>4</sup> These incorrect misperceptions prevent groups from trusting and communicating with each other and thus create an even larger divide.

### How widespread is toxic polarization in the United States?

- The overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions has doubled over the past two decades from 10% to 21%.<sup>5</sup>
- 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat.<sup>6</sup>
- 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican.<sup>7</sup>
- Americans believe that members of the opposite party dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with them two times more than is true.<sup>8</sup>
- 79% of Democrats overestimate the amount Republicans dehumanize them.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Selah, R. (2021, May 25). *Good vs. toxic polarization: Insights from activists and Peacebuilders*. Horizons. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://horizonsproject.us/good-vs-toxic-polarization-insights-from-activists-and-peacebuilders-2>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Beyond Conflict. (2020, June). *Understanding the psychology that drives us apart*. beyondconflictint.org. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://beyondconflictint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Beyond-Conflict-America-s-Divided-Mind-JUNE-2020-FOR-WEB.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center. (2021, April 9). *Political polarization in the American public*. Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Beyond Conflict. (2020, June). *Understanding the psychology that drives us apart*. beyondconflictint.org. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://beyondconflictint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Beyond-Conflict-America-s-Divided-Mind-JUNE-2020-FOR-WEB.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

- 82% of Republicans overestimate the amount Democrats dehumanize them.<sup>10</sup>

### What culture changes and public policies are necessary for preventing toxic polarization?

There are a wide variety of culture and policy changes that can reduce the toxic polarization in the US political system. Beyond Conflict suggests creating an awareness campaign that informs the public of the misperceptions that political parties have of members of the other party.<sup>11</sup> Another change that needed is to hold opinion leaders accountable for spreading misinformation. This involves a “realignment of coverage priorities, [and] political mobilization strategies and tactics.”<sup>12</sup> Two policy suggestions are creating a Department of Peacebuilding and implementing proportional voting. The Department of Peacebuilding Act was proposed in 2019 and “focuses on peace and peacebuilding as a strategic national policy objective and calls for policy development to promote national and international conflict prevention, nonviolent intervention, mediation, peaceful conflict resolution, and structured conflict mediation.”<sup>13</sup> Proportional voting would allow for more political parties to participate in the political system and can increase voter turnout; in turn citizens are “more likely to report feeling that their vote makes a difference.”<sup>14</sup>

### What practical solutions are effective for preventing toxic polarization?

Encouraging a dialogue between partisans, or intergroup contact, is a way of reducing prejudice between groups. It is an opportunity to get to know others without engaging in politics which allows people to find other common ground.<sup>15</sup>

### What can I do to prevent or stop toxic polarization?

Listed below are five ways that individuals can do to reduce polarization in their own spheres.<sup>16</sup>

- Avoid bad jokes – jokes have the effect of normalizing prejudice
- Be kind on social media – this can reduce the spread of misinformation and dehumanization of others
- Emphasize disagreement between party members – this reminds people that there are wide ranging opinions within parties and its not an “us versus them” situation
- Encourage empathy – taking the perspective of the other party can reduce prejudice
- Avoid repeating misinformation

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Beyond Conflict. (2020, June). *Understanding the psychology that drives us apart*. beyondconflictint.org. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from [https://beyondconflictint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Beyond-Conflict-America\\_s-Divided-Mind-JUNE-2020-FOR-WEB.pdf](https://beyondconflictint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Beyond-Conflict-America_s-Divided-Mind-JUNE-2020-FOR-WEB.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hume, L. (2021, January 26). *Building sustainable peace and preventing violence in the United States – Alliance for Peacebuilding*. Alliance for Peacebuilding. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/afp-publications/afp-us-peacebuilding-policy-recommendations>.

<sup>14</sup> De-Witt, L., Van Der Linden, S., & Brick, C. (2019, July 2). *What are the solutions to political polarization?* Greater Good. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what\\_are\\_the\\_solutions\\_to\\_political\\_polarization](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_are_the_solutions_to_political_polarization).

<sup>15</sup> Beyond Conflict. (2020, June). *Understanding the psychology that drives us apart*. beyondconflictint.org. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from [https://beyondconflictint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Beyond-Conflict-America\\_s-Divided-Mind-JUNE-2020-FOR-WEB.pdf](https://beyondconflictint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Beyond-Conflict-America_s-Divided-Mind-JUNE-2020-FOR-WEB.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Kleinfeld, R., & Sobel, A. (2020, July 23). *7 ideas to reduce political polarization. and save America from itself*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved September 1, 2022, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/23/7-ideas-to-reduce-political-polarization.-and-save-america-from-itself-pub-82365>.

### Where can I find statistics about toxic polarization?

- The Pew Research Center shares [this article](#) with statistics about polarization
- The Listen First Project offers this [snapshot of polarization](#) in the US

### Where else might I go to learn more about toxic polarization?

- **Alliance for Peace Building**—A nonprofit and nonpartisan network of organizations working to prevent and reduce violent conflict and build sustainable peace by cultivating a network to strengthen and advance the peacebuilding field, enabling peacebuilding organizations to achieve greater impact. [www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org](http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org)
- **Listen First Project**—This organization leads the collaborative movement to heal America by bridging divides and transforming division and contempt into connection and understanding. They elevate the impact, visibility, and voice of the interpersonal bridge-building field by aggregating, aligning, and amplifying the efforts of #ListenFirst Coalition partner organizations into large scale, national campaigns, and strategies. [www.listenfirstproject.org](http://www.listenfirstproject.org)
- **Pew Research Center**—A nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world. It conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, media content analysis and other empirical social science research. [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org)
- **Beyond Conflict**—This organization combines insights from brain and behavioral science with nearly 30 years of experience in conflict resolution to advance new strategies to prevent violence and promote peace. [www.beyondconflictint.org](http://www.beyondconflictint.org)

### About Peace Through Action USA

Peace Through Action USA activates and equips Americans to implement practical peaceful solutions to aggression and violence in their communities and our country. We are a national-scope, charitable, civic, and social capital-building organization. Learn more at <https://PeaceThroughAction.org>.

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