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Interventions to Reduce Partisan Animosity

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Abstract

Rising partisan animosity is linked to less support for democracy and more support for political violence. Here we provide a multi-level review of interventions designed to improve partisan animosity, which we define as negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors towards a political outgroup. We introduce the TRI framework for the three levels of interventions—Thoughts (correcting misconceptions, highlighting commonalities), Relationships (building dialogue skills, fostering positive contact), and Institutions (changing public discourse, transforming political structures)—and connect these levels by highlighting the importance of motivation and mobilization. Our review encompasses both interventions conducted as part of academic research projects, as well as real-world interventions led by practitioners in nonprofit organizations. We also explore the challenges of durability and scalability, examine self-fulfilling polarization and interventions that backfire, and discuss future directions for reducing partisan animosity.

Keywords: political polarization, partisan animosity, affective polarization, intervention science, intergroup relations

Interventions to Reduce Partisan Animosity

Partisan animosity in America[1–4] undermines our ability to address diverse policy issues such as pandemics[5,6], income inequality[7], and education[8], and may also reduce support for democracy[9] and the peaceful transfer of power[10]. Whereas there are several reviews of the causes and consequences of partisan animosity[1,11–13], there are no reviews of the many interventions[14–30] to reduce it. With millions of dollars invested to reduce partisan animosity across hundreds of organizations and research programs, there is a pressing need for scientific evaluation and synthesis of these interventions. After first defining partisan animosity, discussing the need to reduce it, and outlining its social and psychological mechanisms, we synthesize the interventions that researchers, as well as practitioners in bridge-building organizations, have employed to reduce partisan animosity. We introduce the TRI framework for the three levels of interventions: thoughts, relationships, and institutions. We also discuss ways to motivate people reduce their animosity and mobilize them to effect broader change. Finally, we touch on the durability and scalability of interventions.

Defining Partisan Animosity

Many of the studies we reviewed have used a variant of the polysemous term political polarization, which, broadly, refers to either polarization of ideas or interpersonal polarization. The former is typically referred to as *ideological polarization*[4,31] or *issue polarization*[32], and it reflects disagreement about political issues, policies, or values. This kind of polarization is not negative per se: pluralistic societies have diverse viewpoints, and for democracies to function well, it is helpful for the parties to be easily distinguishable[33]. Interpersonal polarization has, most commonly, been characterized as *affective polarization*[1], which is typically restricted to measures of warmth on a feeling thermometer. Other terms such as *partyism*[34] (hostility and

aversion to a political party), *social polarization*[32] (bias, anger, and activism), and *political intolerance*[35], (unwillingness to let political opponents express their views), have been used less frequently but often address similar constructs.

Recently, the term *political sectarianism*[13] has been introduced. This term refers to "the tendency to adopt a moralized identification with one political group and against another," and it encompasses three parts: othering (viewing people on the other side as fundamentally different from one's own group), aversion (disliking and distrusting outgroup members), and moralization (viewing outgroup members as immoral).

While we believe political sectarianism captures much of the interpersonal polarization landscape, given its recency and specificity, the empirical studies we review have not used the construct as a variable of interest. For that reason and given the diversity of measures researchers *have* used in this space, we opted for what we see as a broader term: *partisan animosity*. We define partisan animosity as negative thoughts, feelings, or behaviors towards a political outgroup. This term is meant to be all-encompassing, so we can bring together under one umbrella a variety of studies that have focused on affective polarization, partyism, social polarization, political intolerance, and political sectarianism, even if the study authors did not use these specific terms.

Finally, the various types of polarization we discussed can occur at two levels: either between/towards people in the general public, or between/towards members of political parties and political elites, with the latter sometimes being referred to as *elite polarization*[36]. Whether participants are aware of the level of polarization they are asked about is a matter of ongoing concern[37]. For our purposes, we are primarily interested in the former—partisan animosity among and toward the public.

Why Reduce Partisan Animosity?

We believe that partisan animosity—harboring and acting upon negative feelings toward a group of people merely based on their party identity —is, itself, undesirable. But partisan animosity is not only inherently negative; it also leads to bad outcomes for individuals and society.

First, partisan animosity may contribute to the erosion of democracy. Partisan animosity is associated with anti-democratic attitudes[9,38] and support for partisan violence [10], although causality is a matter of contention amongst polarization scholars[9,39–41]. Specifically, animosity may drive partisans to disregard constitutional protections (such as separation of powers, checks and balances, and rejection of authoritarian tendencies) when their side is in power, and support these protections when the opposition rises to power[9]. Further, misperceptions about the other side, which are correlated with partisan animosity, weaken commitment to democratic principles[42]. Similarly, partisan animosity may lead people to reject policies they would have otherwise supported, simply because they originate from the outgroup[43].

In addition to its impact on democratic process, partisan animosity could contribute towards prejudice and discrimination against marginalized groups. Because partisan identity is now strongly tied to demographics such as race, gender, and age[44,45], discriminating on the basis of ideology[46–48] also impacts other identity characteristics[49,50]. Thus, another reason to mitigate partisan animosity is because it leads to reduced demographic diversity. For example, if Republicans exclude Democrats from right-leaning spaces and jobs, they may be excluding people of color, women, and younger people. This can perpetuate systemic inequalities in society.

In people's daily lives and in their personal relationships, partisan animosity can lead to heated arguments and loss of trust, respect, and social connection. Family holiday dinners have decreased in duration, which some scholars attribute to political tensions[51]. Perhaps more troubling, people are opting for politically homogenous friendships[52] because associating with political outgroup members is too unpleasant. This can undercut critical social support systems and amplify real world echo chambers where people become increasingly isolated or segregated from others[53].

Some argue that the emphasis on reducing partisan animosity is misplaced[54], or even that reducing animosity would inhibit positive social change, since outgroup animosity may duly serve as a motivator for activism[32]. However, activism in a polarized context is likely to be met with limited legislative success, given the state of gridlock fostered by distrust of political opponents[38]. Further, it is possible to vehemently disagree about policy, while still respecting outgroup members' dignity, so the reduction of partisan animosity need not be paired with a reduction in activism.

Taken together, these reasons present a strong case for the importance of improving cross partisan relations.

What Causes Partisan Animosity?

Political and psychological scientists have outlined several theoretical frameworks to synthesize the causes of partisan animosity, with proposed causes ranging from individual's thoughts to the institutions that organize our society.

At the level of thoughts, partisans hold inaccurate beliefs about their political opponents[14,42,55]. They fail to understand the composition and beliefs of the other side[14,56] and overestimate the extent to which their opponents dehumanize them[42]. Moreover,

animosity is rooted in stereotypes that emerge from a feeling that the other side is more threatening than the data suggests[41,57]. Partisans also exhibit cognitive rigidity, making them less receptive to evidence that counters partisan narratives[58,59].

At the level of relationships, one commonly discussed cause of animosity and polarization is ideological sorting—i.e., that Democrats are now mostly liberal and Republicans mostly conservative[32]. Relatedly, people's partisan identities have begun to fuse with other identities such as ideology, race, religion, gender, sexuality, geography, and so on[1,13,60]. These "mega-identities" lead to stronger ingroup-outgroup dynamics and animosity toward outgroup members[60].

At the level of institutions, the structures of public institutions (e.g., government[1] and social and mass media[61–65]) may amplify stereotypes, making each side seem like a caricature of itself by incentivizing provocative and outrageous rhetoric. These institutions are the platforms for public dialogue, and norms tilt towards hostility.

It is likely that the factors mentioned above, as well as many yet-to-be-identified processes, all play a role in inducing and perpetuating partisan animosity, although some of these factors are disputed[66–70], and scholars across disciplines continue to explore the causes of partisan animosity. For our purposes, we refrain from drawing firm conclusions about any particular cause of partisan animosity, and instead focus our attention on the interventions designed to reduce it.

"TRI"ing to Reduce Partisan Animosity: Thoughts, Relationships, and Institutions

There are many promising interventions for reducing partisan animosity, but until now they have not been methodically categorized. Though there are different ways to make sense of the numerous types of interventions, we believe it is useful to categorize them according to the level at which they intervene. Applying the analytical framework of micro, meso, and macro[71]

to the context of partisan animosity, and mirroring some of the causes outlined above, the interventions cluster around three broad levels: *thoughts*, *relationships*, and *institutions.* To be sure, these categories are conceptual and non-modular as some interventions may carry spillover effects for multiple levels. For example, interventions that treat an individual partisan's beliefs may bring partisans into contact with one another, and changes to interpersonal relationships may shape norms in institutions and vice versa. Nevertheless, by categorizing the interventions in this way, we may gain clarity about how to properly scale and implement a given intervention for reducing partisan animosity (a concept we return to in the section: From Science to Lasting Change).

Interventions targeting thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes correct misconceptions about the outgroup and highlight commonalities between ingroups and outgroups. At the next level, relationship interventions focus on the way individuals interact with their political opponents in their personal lives. Partisans tend to either refrain from interacting with people on the other side[72], or do so in deleterious ways[73]. Relationship interventions build skills for interacting positively with outgroup members, and bring people together for productive, meaningful contact. Finally, institutional interventions focus on changing the institutions that shape our society, from media to political structures. Interventions at the institutional level target the culture within which partisans are embedded, aiming to instill more positive norms and transform incentives surrounding (in)civility.

In each section, we briefly discuss the evidence for animosity as it relates to the level at hand before introducing the various interventions researchers have tested. We also highlight real-world interventions led by practitioners in nonprofit organizations. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of these themes. In the discussion below, we have focused on some of the most

promising interventions in each level. See Box 1 for a discussion of interventions that have backfired (i.e., increased partisan animosity).

Intervening on Thoughts

Partisan animosity is partially the thoughts partisans have: some people hold very negative beliefs and feelings about the opposing party. These interventions focus primarily on correcting misconceptions about outgroups and highlighting group commonalities to address the particular misconception that partisans are very different from one another.

Correcting Misconceptions

Political groups develop warped perceptions about each other, incorrectly thinking their opponents possess especially extreme political views (false polarization)[56,74–76], and lack key human traits (dehumanization)[77,78]. Partisans also overestimate how negatively they would feel if they interacted with their opponents[79], and have exaggerated perceptions of how much their opponents dislike and dehumanize them (inaccurate meta-perceptions)[42,80]. These misconceptions may stem from several sources, such as through the influence of political elites, mass media, and social media[81].

Correcting misconceptions is challenging in many areas (e.g., debunking online misinformation and conspiracy theories[82]), but some interventions appear to be effective. Researchers have reduced negative partisan attitudes[19,24,40] and support for partisan violence[57] by reducing misperceptions about the prevalence of negative partisan attitudes and support for partisan violence, respectively. Further, Republicans and Democrats overestimate the extent to which the other side dehumanizes them by 50-300%, and presenting corrective information can reduce rates of animosity[42]. Animosity can also be reduced by correcting misperceptions about who is in the outgroup (e.g., only 6% of Democrats are LGBT, not 32%,

and only 2% of Republicans earn over $250K annually, not 38%)[14], correcting misconceptions about how humble the other side is[83], and employing metacognitive training to correct stereotypes[22]. Exposure to opponents' thoughtful arguments and personal experiences can also help transform people's perceptions of how thoughtful or dogmatic the other side is[18,26,84,85]. Some media organizations (e.g. AllSides[i]) attempt to correct misconceptions about the other side by exposing partisans to thoughtful representations of alternative political worldviews.

Though our focus is specifically on interventions to reduce partisan animosity, we also note that the strategy of correcting misconceptions has successfully changed other political outcomes, such as reducing ideological commitment[25,56,86, cf. ,87]. Recently, scholars have taken a special interest in anti-democratic attitudes[9]. Falsely believing that an opponent is not committed to democratic principles is associated with one's own decreased commitment to said principles[41]. However, to our knowledge, the only study that reduced misperceptions of outgroup members' negative attitudes had no effect on anti-democratic attitudes[40]. More work in this area is urgently needed given the rise in significant threats to democracy in the US and abroad[10,88,89].

Correcting misconceptions is a key step in decreasing animosity and can be done relatively simply by presenting more accurate information. One particular misconception is the idea that political opponents are essentially different[90], which we turn to next.

Highlighting Commonalities

In recent years, partisan identities have become more salient; for example, many dating app users are now more likely to signal their partisan identity to potential matches[91,92]. When the little information that is available about a person relates to partisan identities[93], it can be

challenging to discover common ground. Despite recent evidence to the contrary[94], partisans are seen as living increasingly different lives[95]. People tend to see outgroup members as being fundamentally different, whether in their moral beliefs or even their pet preferences[96]. But while some partisan differences in demographics and behaviors do exist[32], partisans have much in common. For example, among Americans in the general public, there is bipartisan support for several key issues, such as bolstering social security, raising taxes on capital gains and dividends, deterring illegal immigration, and more[97]. As with other intergroup conflicts, finding common ground may be a path toward bridging divides[98].

Interventions that focus on commonalities either highlight partisans' shared characteristics or reduce the salience of partisan identities. Some researchers use the common ingroup identity model[99,100] as a theoretical basis for emphasizing the American identity that Republicans and Democrats share. While these interventions often reduce negative attitudes in the moment[20,101–103], they may lack durability because people infrequently spontaneously consider broad identities like being American. Conversely, highlighting more community-based identities, like shared sports fandom[102], religious ties[104], or community arts[105] may be more successful in the long term[106], given their salience in daily life.

Other scientists have reduced the salience of partisan identity without directly invoking a common ingroup. For example, partisans who engage with political campaign strategy news feel more positively toward the other side[30]. Political strategy news hides the differences between the parties as both parties engage in similar political strategy. Similarly, when partisans learn information about outgroup members that is unrelated to politics, their partisan animosity lessens[93,107,108].

One large-scale initiative seeking to increase perceived similarity across the aisle is Public Agenda's "Hidden Common Ground" initiative[iii], which helps Americans recognize the commonalities they share through research, journalism, and public engagement. Recognizing some commonality between partisans may be helpful for fostering cross-cutting relationships.

Intervening on Relationships

In addition to improving people's thoughts and feelings toward outgroup members, it is important to improve the interactions between partisans. A great deal of research supports the need for four conditions to be met in order for contact to most thoroughly reduce negative outgroup feelings: 1) equal group status within the contact situation; 2) common goals; 3) intergroup cooperation; and 4) the support of authorities, law, or custom[109–111]. A fifth condition, having the potential for friendship with an outgroup member, has also yielded positive results[112]. Synthesizing some of the classic work on contact theory with recent insights from depolarization interventions, we propose two additional conditions that may lead to greater success in the political context. In addition to the four conditions outlined above, it also may be beneficial to 5) include training in dialogue skills[18,113–115], and 6) structure contact interventions to highlight commonalities[29].

Building Dialogue Skills

Most people fear talking about politics, especially with out-partisans[116–118], so they either avoid these conversations or have them online, where they can caricature and mock those on the other side[119,120]. Political moderates and those who are less polarized (the "exhausted majority")[121] are most likely to opt out of uncomfortable political conversations. This leaves only the most aggressive and least representative people to debate each other—e.g., "committed conservatives" versus "progressive activists"—creating the perception that people are more

polarized than they are (called “false polarization”). It is important for less polarized people to have discussions to minimize social proof of animosity, but they often lack the skills, interest, and confidence to have constructive dialogue across divides[62].

Unfortunately, not many interventions focus on preparing participants for dialogue, and some of the ones that do fail to measure direct effects on partisan animosity. Dialogue trainings teach participants to intentionally inquire about their opponents’ viewpoints[122–124], avoid moralizing language[125], focus on their personal experiences[18,84], use balanced pragmatism[115] and signal receptiveness to opposing views[114]. In at least some of these studies, preparing participants for constructive engagement not only made it more productive and enjoyable, but also increased positive perceptions of political opponents [18,84,123]. One useful strategy is to shift intentions away from *persuasion* toward *understanding*[125]. The Listen First Project[iii], for example, promotes dialogue skills by helping their affiliates proactively seek to understand the other side rather than preach or proselytize to them. Conversational skills are useful for all dialogues, but especially political discussion. By changing how we talk—and listen—we can better respect our opponents’ views.

Fostering Positive Contact

Despite partisans sharing interests in common[94], they are physically isolated from each other in many ways: they frequent different restaurants, work in different careers[95], and are less likely to marry each other[126]. The extent to which geographical sorting (political opponents living in politically homogeneous communities) is occurring is a point of contention amongst political scientists[68–70,72,127–130], but more than half of Republicans and Democrats have “just a few” or “no” close friends who are members of the opposing party, and the absence of cross-party friendships is correlated with hatred for the outgroup[29]. Contact

theory[109] suggests that providing individuals with opportunities to interact with members of opposing groups may remedy negative animus. Indeed, there is a rich body of literature in social psychology detailing the positive effects that contact has for intergroup relations across barriers related to race[131], ethnicity[132], religion[133], and sexual orientation[134].

Researchers have drawn from these insights to create positive and meaningful contact between political opponents, most often through civil conversations, either about political issues or just getting to know each other. Examples include internet forums, workshops, book clubs, and more[i-ix] . Simple contact between partisans can reduce partisan animosity[23,29,110], however, not all forms of contact are equally conducive to reducing animosity, and some forms of contact may even exacerbate animosity[15] (see Box 1 for backfire effects).

Positive intergroup contact can help partisans realize that political divide is narrower than they believe—generating more accurate beliefs[29]. The organization Braver Angels[v] does this by hosting discussions between "blues" and "reds". The discussions focus on policy issues, but also encourage specific forms of dialogue between partisans while highlighting the things they share in common, such as their agreement on many key policy issues[97]. Their work reduces animosity and even increases monetary support for depolarization initiatives[113].

Intervening on Institutions

The broadest level of intervention for reducing partisan animosity is institutional. Current structures and norms of social discourse and government prompt partisan animosity and need to be transformed. Impactful interventions at this level are difficult to implement effectively given their scalability (see the section below on Scalability). Contrary to the previous sections, in which there are numerous studies demonstrating the efficacy of the interventions, the evidence

supporting institutional interventions is much sparser. Nonetheless, we discuss the broad kinds of interventions that could possibly yield positive outcomes.

Changing Public Discourse

We consider both social and mass media as primary components of public discourse and touch on the roles that members of the public, political pundits, and elected officials play in shaping public discourse. Public political discourse may play a role in either increasing or reducing partisan animosity, in part because public communication shapes social norms[80,137] about appropriate ways to communicate across divides.

In the current political climate, many norms surrounding public discourse about politics tend towards hostility and animosity[80,138]. On social media, where signaling outgroup dislike increases engagement, users are incentivized to increase antagonism, facilitate the spread of misinformation, and stoke both tribalism and moral outrage[120,139–144]. Although some emerging evidence questions the causal relationship between the media and political animosity[66,145], interventions could nonetheless improve the design of social media to create a depolarizing experience for users. Political elites (e.g., politicians and media figures) bear some blame for hostile public discourse, in part because their aggressive and dehumanizing behavior serves as a model for others[9,146,147].

Changing public discourse requires reshaping social norms and incentives around polarizing rhetoric. Politicians can model warmth toward one another despite policy differences[16], such as the friendship between Justices Ginsberg and Scalia. Social media platforms could nudge billions of users to be kinder towards the outgroup. This could be accomplished by slowing down people's ability to reply in anger and highlighting less polarizing content with their news algorithms[62]. However, these solutions would likely result in reduced

engagement[120], so there is little incentive for the platforms to implement such measures. Indeed, leaked documents from Facebook provide evidence that the social media company weights "angry" reactions five times as heavily as "likes" in deciding what content to display to users[143]. Users could simply deactivate social media[cf. 145,148], but tech isolationism is difficult in an interconnected world[62]. Alternatively, fine-tuning social media platforms to promote content that receives bipartisan support may incentivize good-faith cross-partisan engagement[62].

Mass media can provide powerful social proof to reduce partisan animosity[x-xii][80,149,150] by balancing politically extreme pundits with a more diverse and representative set of perspectives, emphasizing people's increasing desire to reduce animosity[151,152], highlighting that most Americans are not even interested in politics, let alone polarized[93,121,153], correcting people's misinformation and exaggerations about the other side[19,24,56,154], and encouraging norms of open mindedness[155]. Unfortunately, media outlets are also incentivized against these measures: they themselves are often strongly polarized, and polarization helps to draw viewers[149]. However, bipartisan and nonpartisan news aggregators[i,x,xi] offer a promising respite by presenting reasonable positions from across the political spectrum.

Changing public discourse is one step toward creating a less polarized environment but its lasting success requires that we transform the political structures that incentivize partisan animosity.

Transforming Political Structures

To enact lasting change, many have argued that our political system (in the U.S.) needs to change[156,157]. FairVote[xiii] is an organization doing important work to advocate for structural

change that could reduce hyper-partisanship, for example, by advancing ranked-choice voting. Advancing democratic rights, reducing gerrymandering, and campaign finance reform are other structural changes could potentially reduce animosity[157]. Although these structural changes are beyond the scope of this review, we highlight how some of these proposed changes could impact partisan animosity in Box 2.

Connecting the Levels: Motivate and Mobilize

The three intervention levels—reducing animosity at the levels of thoughts, relationships, and institutions—have largely each been studied in isolation. Changing basic cognitions requires different knowledge and tools a than lobbying for large-scale political change, but reducing partisan animosity requires an integrated approach that connects all three levels. It is not enough to just have more accurate perceptions of the other side, or to have a few positive interactions with outgroup members. To implement lasting change, once partisans alter the way they think about their opponents, practitioners must *motivate* them to form relationships with outgroup members. And once they have adopted more civil attitudes, partisans need to be *mobilized* to advocate for institutional change (See Figure 1).

Motivate

Thought-level interventions focus on changing partisan mindsets including correcting negative beliefs about opponents[77,78] and the scale of animosity[42,80]. However, there is a difference between *liking* and *wanting*[158]*:* feeling more favorably towards a cross-partisan does not automatically translate into enthusiasm about interacting with them. To our knowledge, no research has explored how to motivate civil cross-partisan engagement, but it likely requires more than simply correcting misconceptions and highlighting commonalities. Motivation for

behavior change may be increased by focusing on potential benefits[159], in this case rewarding cross-partisan interactions.

While social proof[160] can accelerate animosity (a concept we elaborate on in Box 3), it can also motivate people to reduce animosity. People do not want miss out on social trends targeted at improving the common good, as the "ice bucket challenge" for ALS research demonstrates[161]. Perhaps there is an opportunity to create a "reducing animosity" challenge. Further, scientists and practitioners could help create positive social proof by changing the way they talk about their depolarization work[80]. First, they could emphasize shifting norms: more and more people are committed to reducing animosity[151]. False polarization could be another point of emphasis. While a minority of Americans are very affectively polarized, most are not as polarized as many assume, nor strongly interested in politics[93,121]. If the media were to emphasize this lack of polarization (as some have[153]), people may be motivated to conform to this descriptive norm of low partisan animosity.

Mobilize

Researchers and practitioners can reduce animosity by changing individual mindsets, motivating people to engage with opponents, and providing opportunities for positive contact. People can commit to long-term personal change by implementing commitment devices[162,163] and can translate that commitment into action by using if-then plans that specify how to respond to opportunities (e.g., to listen while the opponent is speaking) or obstacles (e.g., staying calm when opponents disparage one's opinions). However, large-scale impact requires connecting positive interpersonal experiences to broad institutional change. To do so, people need to commit to influencing their social circles and advocating for systemic change. Some organizations, such as Braver Angels[v], have infrastructure set up for expanding

their reach, for example by recruiting volunteers to be ambassadors, organizers, and event moderators. We encourage researchers to evaluate similar approaches.

Some mobilization efforts identify easy, simple tasks that many people are willing to do, but while these efforts could scale widely, they may not lead to durable change, especially when they scale only within certain social groups. A comprehensively effective mobilization movement would also develop a base of people committed to sustained, effortful action. This could be achieved by giving people responsibility for key outcomes and enmeshing them in an ever-growing network of meaningful relationships with outgroup members[164,165].

From Science to Lasting Change

We note that partisan animosity is a specific example of a broader phenomenon: intergroup prejudice[109]. A recent review of 418 prejudice reduction experiments, including extended and imaginary contact, cognitive and emotional training, social categorization, etc., found that few studies demonstrated strong evidence of success [166] (political prejudice was excluded from the review). We suspect that some of the same issues those authors raised (e.g., publication bias, small sample sizes, short-term outcomes) may apply to the studies we discussed as well. Many interventions show promise in controlled, small-scale studies, but the most successful interventions need to be effective (have reliable, large effects), durable (have long-lasting effects), broad (influence partisans across the political spectrum), and scalable (be practically applicable in real-world settings). We describe the science behind two of these elements—durability and scalability—below.

Durability

Durable interventions are long-lasting, continuing to impact behavior even in the chaotic environment of everyday life. One potential predictor of durability is depth of engagement. Just

as memorizing new information is helped by experiential learning and personal relevance[167] reductions in animosity may be more durable when they are relatively "deeper." For example, just reading about one's own misconceptions[14,19,24,56] may help in the short-term, but may soon creep back in after being re-immersed in partisan media coverage. Conversely, interventions that involve repeated personal (and positive) connections with political opponents are likely more durable. For example, hosting standing dinner parties with outgroup members[168] or joining a longstanding religious group with diverse political viewpoints[169] are likely both relatively durable interventions.

Additionally, other work on "wise interventions"[170] shows that lasting treatments act upon desires concordant with human nature like subjective meaning-making. For interventions to be more durable, they should satisfy the three motives that guide meaning making: accuracy, self-integrity, and belongingness. Interventions that guide partisans to arrive at accurate beliefs about their opponents, enhance partisans' self-integrity, and instill ingroup norms of kindness and civility may sustainably reduce partisan animosity. Importantly, interventions should not tell participants what to think, rather they should encourage internal reflection so that the change will be a result of internal meaning making as opposed to controlling[171].

Scalability

Scalable interventions are able to reach many people while remaining efficacious[172], and can involve tweaks to existing large-scale platforms[15]. For example, Twitter has a highly scalable intervention that asks its millions of users if they would actually like to read an article before sharing[173]. Another example of scalable interventions is "cellular organizations," where each chapter (or "cell") is independently organized and quasi-independent yet supported by the broader organizational infrastructure. Cellular organizations include fast-food franchises,

sororities, and Alcoholics Anonymous chapters. Bridge USA[vi] is an example of a cellular organization, because it can be initiated by any group of motivated students at any college.

Durability vs. Scalability

Highly durable interventions may be more difficult to scale, and scalable interventions may not be durable. Small social media tweaks may not foster good will between partisans in heated offline encounters, and transformative personal relationships with cross-partisans may be hard to duplicate across the country—especially without substantial resources. Researchers have tried to create low-cost scalable interventions through vicarious or imagined contact between partisans but their efficacy is unclear[28,29,174]. Positive, semi-structured cross-partisan "in-person" discussions over online platforms (e.g., Zoom) may allow greater scalability while providing adequate durability[xiv].

Bridging Research and Practice

Relevant to the tension between durability and scalability, there is a tension between research and practice[175]. Although many scientists and practitioners are committed to understanding partisan animosity, scientists develop novel and theoretically driven interventions that target social or cognitive processes but are typically less interested in scalability or durability in the real world. In contrast, practitioners are interested in creating powerful examples of real-world depolarization that typically prioritize either durability (deploying within a community to stop cycles of violence) or scalability (developing a television program with national reach), but are typically less interested in novelty or measuring the exact process of change.

Given the complementary interests of scientists and practitioners, partnerships might be helpful for developing effective interventions. Scientists can help evaluate real-world interventions and identify the "active ingredient" whereas practitioners can tell scientists what

actually works "on the ground" with diverse samples and speak to an intervention's potential for durability and scalability. Challenges to collaboration include different jargon, assumptions, and incentives, but overcoming these challenges is essential to developing and testing strategies that will produce lasting change. Programs like the Strengthening Democracy Challenge[xv], which invites researchers and practitioners from all areas and industries to submit interventions for strengthening democracy and reducing partisan animosity, are a step in the right direction.

Concluding Remarks and Future Perspectives

In the quest to develop more effective interventions for reducing partisan animosity, we highlight four considerations for future research: variation, replicability, scope, and interdisciplinarity. See also the Outstanding Questions in Table 1 for future directions tied to the specific intervention themes.

Variation: Tuning Interventions to Audiences, Issues, and Contexts

As no single intervention strategy is likely to reduce polarization for every audience and every issue, an overarching goal for researchers will be to determine *what works, for which outcomes, for whom,* and *under what circumstances*[175,176]. Interventions (*what works*) combine content (the strategy employed) and methods of delivery. Features of intervention delivery include the setting (e.g., home, community center, workplace), mode (e.g., face-to-face, online), format (e.g., workbooks, discussion groups), source (e.g., researcher, community leader), and intensity (e.g., total contact time, number of sessions). Different combinations of content and methods of delivery may be suited to the outcomes we have discussed (correcting misperceptions, highlighting commonalities, building dialogue skills, and fostering positive contact). For instance, a one-shot, online computerized task could correct key misperceptions

whereas building dialogue skills might require face-to-face sessions from an expert source over an extended period.

Features of the audience (*whom*) that warrant consideration include individual differences in cognitive rigidity[59], moral conviction[177], and curiosity[178], among many others. Democrats and Republicans may also differ in their response to interventions due to dispositional and normative differences between parties[15–17,136]. The effectiveness of interventions may also vary between issues and contexts (*circumstances*). Social issues elicit stronger emotional reactions and are more tied to core religious or moral convictions and group identities than economic issues and are thus liable to lead to more contentious debates [179]. Features of the context such as the point in the electoral cycle[180] or even outdoor temperature[181] could also influence the intensity of initial partisanship and, in turn, the impact of an intervention.

Variation in the effectiveness of interventions arising from differences in content, method of delivery, audience, outcome, and circumstances could seem daunting. However, heterogeneity of intervention effects is the norm rather than the exception in behavioral trials[176]. Researchers will need to recognize, from the outset, that many interventions inevitably will fail. By construing variability in effectiveness, not as a limitation of the research, but rather as a route to specifying the parameters that govern when an intervention does not work, researchers can begin to develop a database that can answer the practical question that readily occurs to observers: Will this intervention work for this issue, this sample, and this context?

Replicability and Generalization

Concerns of replicability and generalization should be a priority for researchers, especially as they work with practitioners to implement their interventions. Some promising interventions have failed to replicate[87,103]. In one study, the authors found that asking people

to explain complex policies reduced dogmatism[86]. In another, proximity to the 4th of July was associated with less animosity[20]. Potential reasons for the failed replications range from small samples, lack of preregistration, participant exclusion procedures, etc. Additionally, sometimes interventions may fail to replicate because of the ever-changing political landscape, something that could be examined through longitudinal studies. Testing interventions beyond the U.S.[24] may be useful in demonstrating the generalizability of findings. Further, relating to the point above, these failed replications may be alternatively construed as indications of the contexts in which the interventions are and are not effective.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

So far, the research space on interventions to reduce animosity has been confined to research silos in social and personality psychology, political science, sociology, and communication. In addition to collaborating with organizations on-the-ground (discussed above), researchers could likely draw insights from other academic disciplines that focus on intervention research. For example, researchers in public health, behavioral economics, and education have experience and expertise relevant to changing behavior and norms[182].

Conclusion

Partisan animosity is a growing concern in the U.S., prompting scientists and practitioners to examine its roots and potential solutions. We have attempted to synthesize this rich and quickly growing body of work and acknowledge that there may be other ways to structure this knowledge. Nevertheless, we hope that this review helps to make sense of the variety of interventions and prompts future research in the field. Partisan animosity is powerful, but so is the potential for interdisciplinary work between scientists and practitioners to help overcome it.

Box 1: Why Interventions Backfire

Sometimes interventions backfire and end up increasing aniomsity[15,17,29,183]. We review three themes of backfiring interventions: *stereotype amplification*, *improper preparation*, and *side effects*.

Stereotype Amplification. In a recent Twitter study, participants followed bots that retweeted prominent out-party members, which the authors thought may reduce polarization by breaking down echo chambers. However, rather than reducing polarization, this intervention did the opposite—participants became more entrenched in their views[15]. One explanation for this finding is that prominent out-party members are stereotypically polarized, which confirms the idea that the other side holds very different values and beliefs. Practitioners should avoid exposing participants to extreme stereotypes of outgroups.

Improper Preparation. For interventions to succeed, participants must be prepared for them. For example, for contact to be effective, participants should first recognize the similarities with their opponents and be confident in their dialogue skills. Otherwise contact can fail or even backfire. One study found that when partisans imagined conversing with a political outgroup member, they became more anxious and less empathic, and ultimately more polarized[29]. This effect may have occurred because partisans lacked the dialogue skills and recognition of commonality necessary for engaging with opponents.

Side Effects. Sometimes interventions may reduce some aspects of polarization while creating other problems. For example, priming common identities is generally successful at reducing polarization, but some common identities can have negative side effects. In one study, priming American identity led to negative attitudes toward immigrants[183]. In another, creating a common identity between Republicans and Democrats about mistrust of a foreign power

actually reduced cooperation between them[17]. More broadly, even if interventions can promote civility, they also may inadvertently delegitimize the views on either side[184].

More Investigation Needed

Research on backfiring is limited with only a few published studies[15,17,29,183], possibly because of misaligned incentives to publish positive findings[185]. However, identifying when and why interventions fail would enable practitioners to re-allocate resources away from unhelpful strategies and toward best practices instead.

538

Box 2: Transforming Political Structures

American political institutions are structured in a way that exacerbates conflict and solidifies gridlock. Political scientists have proposed several changes to these institutions, which, in addition to promoting more efficient governance, may also reduce affective polarization among the electorate. Much of this is speculative and theoretical, as none of these changes have been fully implemented. Importantly, some political scientists are skeptical about their ability to reduce polarization[186–188], so we note them here as food for thought, rather than making definitive claims about the effects of these proposals.

Changes that could reduce polarization:

Multiparty democracy. Having multiple viable parties could encourage cooperation, as interparty coalitions would be a prerequisite for governance. Further, negative campaigning may be a riskier strategy in multiparty systems, because attacking other parties can backfire, damaging not only the party under attack but also the attacking party. If the reputations of both parties are damaged, then, in comparison, a third or fourth party would be more appealing to voters[189].

Open primaries. Open primaries allow independents to vote in primary elections, perhaps lessening the disproportionate sway that more partisan voters have in closed primary systems[190].

Top two primaries. This reform would eliminate party primaries and instead would be a primary of all candidates, where the top two candidates, regardless of party, would advance to the general election. Incentives to focus on base turnout could diminish and instead shift campaign goals towards persuadable voters[190].

Proportional representation systems and ranked choice voting. Contrary to "winner take all" systems, proportional representation systems allow parties to gain seats in proportion to the number of votes cast for them. Ranked choice voting enables voters to select multiple candidates, ranking them on an ordinal scale ($1^{st}, 2^{nd}, 3^{rd}$, etc.). This procedure could make voting for a third or fourth party less futile[191,192].

Gerrymandering reform. Gerrymandering is the process in which legislators design electoral districts in a manner that is favorable to their own party. This tends to create "safe seats" where certain candidates are virtually guaranteed electoral success. Reforming this system could establish more competitive districts where appealing to non-partisans and providing effective governance would be incentivized[193].

Campaign finance reform. This reform would limit the power of individual donors who tend to support ideologically extreme candidates and incentivize more ideologically heterogeneous candidates to run[194].

Box 3: Self-Fulfilling Polarization

Ironically, the more that researchers, public figures, and the media lament the rise of political polarization, the more we may be contributing to the problem.

People on the left and right perceive others as more ideologically extreme than they actually are, which in turn affects the extremity of their own views[56]. Further, Americans hold wildly inaccurate stereotypes about the political outgroup (e.g., overestimating the number of LGBT Democrats or rich Republicans)[14]. These misrepresentations are associated with negative attitudes toward the outgroup. Indeed, *perceived,* as opposed to *actual* ideological polarization may be a stronger driver of negative outgroup attitudes[74].

Shifting to misconceptions about partisan animosity, Americans hold exaggerated beliefs about how negatively their political outgroup feels about their ingroup[19]. This bias leads partisans to believe the outgroup is motivated by the intent to purposefully obstruct various politically relevant scenarios. These findings have been replicated in over 10,000 participants across 26 countries[24].

Why do we observe this process of self-fulfilling polarization? One reason may be that media discussion about extreme polarization communicates descriptive norms to which people tend to conform[80,160]. In other words, hearing about a divided country causes people to believe that is the case, and then follow suit.

Researchers and practitioners studying polarization should be aware of the potential harm they may cause by enhancing perceptions of polarization and identify measures to mitigate these. See the section on highlighting commonalities for more details.

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Resources

i. https://www.allsides.com

ii. https://www.publicagenda.org/programs-reports/the-hidden-common-ground-initiative/

iii. https://www.listenfirstproject.org/

iv. https://americatalks.us/

v. https://braverangels.org/

vi. https://www.bridgeusa.org/

vii. https://livingroomconversations.org/

viii. https://narrative4.com/

ix. https://openmindplatform.org/

x. https://www.theflipside.io/

xi. https://ground.news/

xii. https://apps.bowdoin.edu/media-trades/index.jsp

xiii. https://www.fairvote.org/

xiv. https://www.unifyamerica.org/

xv. https://www.strengtheningdemocracychallenge.org/

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Figure 1: Six Themes of Interventions for Reducing Partisan Animosity

Interventions range from Thoughts (correcting misperceptions, highlighting commonalities) to Relationships (building dialogue skills, fostering positive contact) to Institutions (changing public discourse and transforming political structures). To transcend between the levels, people need to be motivated and mobilized, respectively.

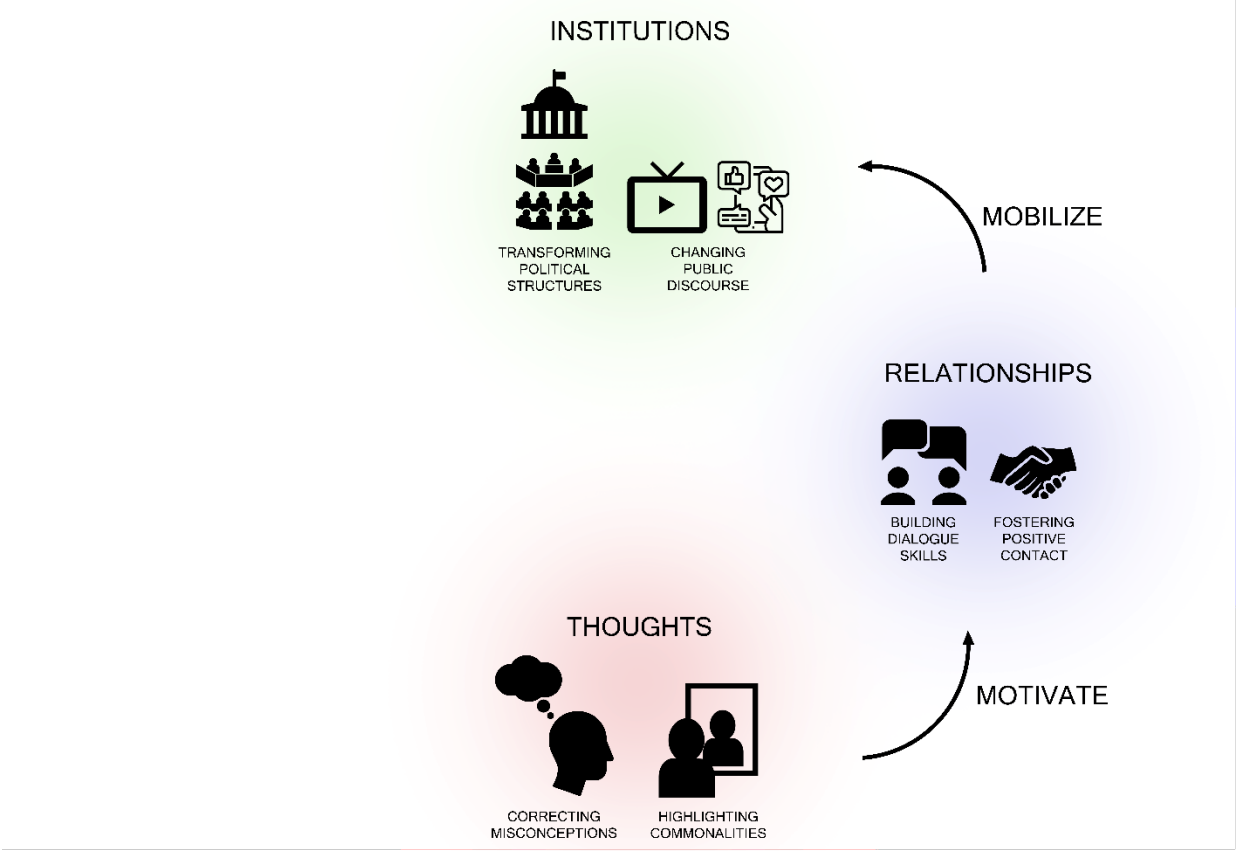

Table 1: Outstanding Questions

	Intervention Theme	Outstanding Questions
Thoughts	**Correcting Misconceptions** Improving partisans' knowledge and understanding of their outgroup's attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and composition	▪ What else besides motives and group composition do people have misconceptions about? ▪ Do these corrections carry more weight coming from an ingroup member, outgroup member, or a neutral observer? ▪ What are the effects of correcting misconceptions about ideological extremity on partisan animosity?
	Highlighting Commonalities Reframing partisan identity to encompass the outgroup	▪ Are there other common ingroup identities that might yield better results? ▪ How can common identities be incorporated into daily life? ▪ Can certain identities be de-politicized by emphasizing common attributes?
Relationships	**Building Dialogue Skills** Teaching partisans to communicate effectively across political divides	▪ What other dialogue skills are there to reduce partisan animosity in intergroup contact? ▪ Are dialogue skills easier to implement in person or behind a screen?
	Fostering Positive Contact Creating opportunities for partisans to engage with one another	▪ In what context does getting people out of their bubbles work and in what context does it not work (online vs. in person)? ▪ How can we create scalable contact interventions on the internet without it backfiring?
Institutions	**Changing Public Discourse** Addressing cultural and institutional factors that create hostile and polarizing environments	▪ How can interventions best compete against attention-grabbing narratives that polarize? ▪ How can researchers address partisan animosity without fostering exaggerated perceptions of ideological polarization?