Book Reviews

Jan-Willem van Prooijen ed., *The Psychology of Political Polarization* (New York: Routledge, 2021). 180 pages. ISBN: 9780367487164. Paperback $37.56.

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We are living in a highly polarized era as a result of many factors, such as immigration, populist governments, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Although political polarization is mostly evaluated as a macro-level phenomenon from a top-down perspective, *The Psychology of Political Polarization*, edited by Jan-Willem van Prooijen, is a well-timed contribution examining its psychological roots, namely, micro- and meso-level determinants of political polarization. The book challenges the popular and simplistic assumption that political polarization's main cause is economic deterioration by presenting both psychological and societal root causes, which imply a more complicated picture.

In Chapter 1, van Prooijen reviews the literature on the psychological determinants of political polarization, such as overconfidence, intolerance, and motivated reasoning. The remainder of the book is composed of two sections each containing four chapters. The first section (Chapters 2–5) focuses on the emotional, cognitive, and motivational factors contributing to political polarization, while the second section of the book (Chapter 6–9) attempts to explain the social context of political polarization by examining social networks and societal developments. The contributions to Section 1 include discussions of polarization and psychological needs (Christpher M. Federico, Chapter 2), the distinction between populism and polarization (Alain van Heil, Jasper van Assche, and Tessa Haesevoets, Chapter 3), the psychological profile of extreme supporters of Donald Trump (Laura Kinsman and Jeremy A. Frimer, Chapter 4), and differences in relational goals among left- and right-polarized partisans (Chadly Stern, Chapter 5). Section 2 includes the topics of polarization and cultural backlash (Jolanda Jetten and Frank Mols,

Chapter 6), social pressures and the "agreement paradox" (Lucian Gideon Conway III, Shannon C. Houck, Linus Chan, Meredith A. Repke, and James D. McFarland, Chapter 7), the impact of social networks on protest norms (Marlon Mooijman, Chapter 8), and the effectiveness of experimental interventions on political polarization about climate change (Jacob B. Rode and Peter H. Ditto, Chapter 9).

In Chapter 2, Federico merges bottom-up/top-down dimensions of political polarization with a special emphasis on individual differences in the need for security and certainty. He argues that psychological differences are significant for the formation of political differences as well as political polarization, but these should be regarded through multiple mechanisms, namely, epistemic and existential needs, political engagement, and issue positions. In making his argument, Federico draws on several meta-analyses that measure existential concerns through variables such as fear and threat, while epistemic concerns are measured through needs for structure and order, need for closure, intolerance of ambiguity, rigidity, dogmatic/integrative complexity, analytic thinking, need for cognition, and uncertainty tolerance. The reviewed results indicate that the relationship between epistemic concerns and political preferences (right-wing versus liberal preferences) is more significant than the relationship between existential concerns and support for right-wing policies. In other words, epistemic concerns have more polarizing effects than existential concerns.

Federico's second argument is that individuals differing in existential and epistemic needs are more polarized in partisanship and ideology at higher levels of political engagement because of their extreme position in ideological and partisan attitudes. Federico's rationale is that politically engaged citizens with different partisan and ideological identities will also prefer different issue positions and policy types (economic and social issue domains). According to Federico, the literature suggests that needs for security and certainty are less related to opinions in the economic domain than in the social domain because of the greater difficultly of comprehending economic issues compared with social issues. Additionally, Federico maintains that engaged citizens are

more open to elite cues about which positions are in line with their political identities. Based on their higher needs for security and certainty, politically engaged citizens are polarized more in their issue positions because they are more likely to be sorted into parties and ideologies holding divergent issue positions. In sum, Federico's analyses suggest psychological needs for security and certainty determine political preferences, but other mechanisms, such as elite messages, issue positions, and political engagement, also matter for political polarization.

Looking at the relationship between social factors and polarization, in Chapter 7, Conway et al. elaborate on how pressures to agree with others may contribute to more societal division, which they call the "agreement paradox." The agreement paradox is a condition in which societal divisions emerge because individuals experience psychological stress from social pressures to agree with others. According to these authors, these social pressures may generate superficial consensuses in the short term but also have the potential to create broader political divisions in the long term. Building on existing research, the authors attempt to understand the specific type of person who is prone to the agreement paradox. The authors begin with authoritarian personalities, as authoritarians desire cultural stability while also being the kinds of people who polarize and divide cultures.

To investigate the association between the agreement paradox and authoritarian personalities, Conway et al. conduct two studies. In the first study, the authors assessed the association between right- and left-wing authoritarian personalities (RWA/LWA) and divisive outcome support, support for Trump's removal prior to the 2020 presidential election, and support for Nancy Pelosi's 2020 ripping up of the State of the Union speech. They find that authoritarians on both scales tended toward divisive outcomes, with LWA supporting Pelosi and RWA supporting president Trump.

Conway et al.'s second study was intended develop the association between authoritarian personalities and the experience of psychological stress from social pressures to agree. Their analyses are based on two theories related to agreement paradox, psychological reactance and informational contamination. Reactance theory suggests that perceived social pressures result in an increased perception of threat to one's individual freedoms, while informational contamination mostly happens when the value of expressed agreement is informationally discounted and public pressure does not reflect a real consensus. The aim of the second study was to identify to what extent authoritarianism is a predictor for specific divisive cases such as removing Trump from office, and which kind of authoritarian (LWA/RWA) is more prone to either reactance or informational contamination. A sample of 350 participants completed a three-item scale of informational contamination and psychological reactance. The results show that both key agreement paradox variables mediate the LWA in voting intent as well as the politically divisive attempt to remove Trump from office. High-RWA persons showed lower informational contamination, while there was no effect for reactance. These results surprisingly suggest that authoritarians are the most likely to care about consensual agreement, but they are also likely to be more polarized because citizens caring about agreement are also more sensitive to challenges to that agreement and more susceptible to reactance and informational contamination.

The book suffers from some weaknesses, however, such as its limitation to Western-based examples and conventional methodology. Although previous literature also points to political polarization and populist governments in new democracies in the Middle East and Latin America (Selçuk, 2016), the book's overemphasis on U.S. samples inhibits its generalizability to other cases around the world. It is also important to note that political polarization has recently attracted many scholars focusing on political neuroscience (Jost et al., 2014) and the affective dimension of polarization (Bakker et al., 2020), which the book uses minimally. Although the authors elaborate on psychological differences based on individual needs and grievances, they do not discuss what the insights provided by novel approaches tell us about how individual differences occur and how they affect political polarization. In other words, the book would be richer if it had utilized recent developments in the field, especially life sciences or neuroscientific approaches.

The book makes an important and timely contribution to research on political polarization. Because of its sophisticated use of psychological terminology and experimental methods, I would recommend this book for an audience familiar with political psychology. It is particularly well suited for work at, or above, the level of graduate studies. The strength of the book is that it touches on current events. The book is a timely

contribution during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused polarized and conflicting attitudes toward its preventative measures. This book is up to date because of its policy-based examples such as climate change, the victory of Trump in the U.S. elections, and COVID-19 measures, as well as because it establishes a link with current populist leaders and governments. Thus, the most important contribution of the book is extending our understanding on the psychological roots of attitudes towards recent developments in politics.

References

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