

Episode 1

Breaking the Divide: The Psychology Behind Polarization

SPEAKERS

Sandy Pentland, Dave Rand, Mina Cikara, Yph Leikes, Josh Greene, Kurt Nelson, and Tim Houlihan

Tim Houlihan 00:10

Since the American Revolution and the founding of the United States, we've had more than a few periods of political unrest. During the earliest days of the Republic, there were heated debates between the Federalists and the anti-Federalists over whether the States or the federal government had the greatest power in the middle of the 19th century, economics and the enslavement of human beings eventually led to the Civil War, and in the 1960s social upheaval amidst the war in Vietnam dominated the headlines as well as Congress.

Kurt Nelson 00:38

So, polarization isn't new, but it kind of feels different these days, mostly because we didn't live through those other eras, and we don't feel the past like we feel the present. However, the polarization that we have now didn't just come out of thin air. It's been brewing for some time. Some researchers even trace political polarization in the United States back to the late 1960s and 70s, when we saw the beginnings of a raw brand of partisanship.

Tim Houlihan 01:05

But that was before cable television and the 24-hour news cycle. When CNN was founded in 1980 it inadvertently created a burden to cover the news with stories every minute of every day. While it was mostly apolitical in the early years, the introduction of Fox News in 1986 created a need for market differentiation, and the cable giants battled their way through the 1990s and 2000s by increasing their partisan messaging.

Kurt Nelson 01:32

So, as the media increased its partisan focus, they began to attract viewers with similar political leanings, and in an interesting twist, they generated more revenue from advertisers. It was a winning combination for the media companies: more streamlined messaging led to more viewers and higher advertising rates for their programming. And the same thing was happening with the political parties.

Tim Houlihan 01:57

In the 1970s, the parties were more mixed. It was common to see liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. but in the '80s, the parties began to sort out the misfits. So today there are only a few moderates in each party.

Kurt Nelson 02:12

This differentiation makes it easier for voters. All the Conservatives are on one team and all the Liberals are on the other. Today, the lines between parties have more defined borders, and that makes it easier to tell the difference between us and them. And that is at the heart of polarization.

Tim Houlihan 02:29

This is a series about political polarization in the context of the 2024 election. I'm Tim Houlihan.

Kurt Nelson 02:36

And I'm Kurt Nelson. Welcome to Behavioral Grooves.

Tim Houlihan 02:44

In December 2023, our friend and University of Pennsylvania researcher Eugen Dimont invited Kurt and I to Boston, Massachusetts, into the hallowed halls of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or MIT, as it's known.

Kurt Nelson 02:58

Eugen and a few of his colleagues invited more than 20 researchers from the finest institutions from around the world to share their latest research on political polarization. They put on a conference that brought in almost 100 other academics to hear this latest research.

Tim Houlihan 03:13

Kurt and I spent two days bouncing between a lecture hall with the researchers and their slides and a tiny break room down the hall where we recorded 10 interviews with some of those who had given talks.

Kurt Nelson 03:24

We are releasing the series in 2024 after both parties have had their conventions, but ahead of the November presidential election in the United States. Our hope is that you get a better understanding of the challenges involved in polarization, a fresh perspective on what polarization might mean to you, and if we do this right, you'll come away with a better idea of what's being done and what you can do about polarization as well.

Tim Houlihan 03:50

In each of the three episodes, you'll hear short interviews with some of the brightest minds on the planet who are investigating the issues surrounding polarization, like, what does it mean to be

polarized, and what are the causes and effects of polarization? How bad is it really? And maybe most importantly: what can we do about it?

Kurt Nelson 04:10

The MIT conference we attended covered research from around the world, but the focus of this series is the political system in the United States. We hope that our listeners in other countries will still find it interesting, or at the very least informative to understanding the “crazy political landscape” that we in America are living in.

Tim Houlihan 04:30

Yes, America can feel quite crazy at times, but we are hopeful that these podcasts can help you sort through that craziness.

Kurt Nelson 04:38

In our interviews, we hear researchers use terms like elite and electorate and citizenry and voters. Some of these terms have very specific meanings for researchers that may not be in most people's common lexicon.

Tim Houlihan 04:53

For instance, the term political elite refers to the people who are on the inside, like elected officials, their staff, their strategists, and the most politically motivated in the country, such as very large donors. It also includes the media, as they are the primary transmitters of political messaging. Political elite exist on all sides of the issues, and they are often the ones who generate the statements and commentaries that we, the voters see and hear.

Kurt Nelson 05:19

The political elite are not average people like you and me, Tim, who have opinions about politics, however well informed they might be, for say, (even if they have a fantastic podcast on behavioral science, but I digress). People with these robust opinions are referred to as the electorate or voters, or just plain citizens, and it turns out there are big differences between those two groups that is the political elite and the average citizen, and we'll hear more about them in these episodes.

Tim Houlihan 06:00

To get us started, let's hear from Sandy Pentland, an MIT professor who will walk us through some of the foundational elements in understanding polarization. Sandy is one of the founders of the MIT Media Lab, and if you're not familiar with the amazing work the Media Lab has done, please check out the links in this episode.

Kurt Nelson 06:18

Sandy is also the author of a couple of great books, our favorite being “Social Physics: How Good Ideas Spread. The Lessons from a New Science.”

Tim Houlihan 06:27

Sandy talked about the concept of polarization and how it's linked to common issues such as misinformation and misdirection, and he shared some observations based on some research he did with Rob Willer. Sandy helped us understand the roots of polarization, some of the challenges associated with it and the role intentions play in our communication.

Kurt Nelson 06:48

We started with a simple question, what is polarization? His answer got us thinking,

Sandy Pentland 06:54

Well, I think that you know the word polarization is sort of prejudicial. Having different views from different stakeholders is not necessarily bad at all. You want to have different voices, right?

Kurt Nelson: Right.

Tim Houlihan: We value that

Sandy Pentland: And those voices are grounded in experience. And so, if you get different communities together, right? You're going to have people who really believe different things, and they believe them very firmly. And you could call that polarization. But actually what you are is you're hearing different voices around a thing, and they need to understand each other better to make what we could call **deliberative democracy** work right. There has to be that sort of mutual compromise or understanding that results in collective action, where they can decide what to do. Okay. Looking at the problem of polarization in this country and in other countries too, because the EU suffers from a lot of this. Also, of course, as do some other countries, you know, first notice that it's not a question of misinformation. People have said, 'oh, it's all misinformation and that's the problem,' right? Okay, but that's a very sort of near-term type of thing. We deal with misinformation all the time.

Kurt Nelson 08:08

So, to begin with, having different perspectives on politics is not bad in and of itself. That is important. But Tim, this idea that misinformation isn't the heart of the problem, that's actually sort of good news. Misinformation happens in a lot of areas, and we work through it. However, there is a particular kind of misinformation that is really key.

Tim Houlihan 08:30

Yeah, Sandy makes a particular reference to misinformation in that it has a specific intention to get voters to believe that the other side is bad.

Sandy Pentland 08:41

So, if you're trying to rally the base, which is what everybody talks about this, they wouldn't, do you want to get everybody fired up, you know, as of what's better than they're cheating, they're out to kill you, right? You know, hide your babies, right? You know, that sort of thing, right? Because who can prove that? Right? So, you can claim that you can get them all sort of riled up. A classic one that is everywhere in the press, and this is one of the major things that's wrong with the press, is what is called

nut picking. You find somebody who is of type X, okay, Republican or a Democrat who's crazy. And you say, look, see these Democrats, they're crazy, right? Okay, because, and it's true, because this guy really is crazy, okay?

Tim Houlihan 09:25

And he is part of that, that group, that's right, yeah.

Sandy Pentland 09:29

So all that group must be that, yeah, and, and the dynamic there, unfortunately, is, is that today, all media, including *The New York Times* and the social media, make money off of clicks. Yes, okay, so what you want is, you want a headline that says, you know, "Republicans Eat Babies!" Because you're gonna get a lot of clicks. Okay, now, so, so we have this mechanism, the financial incentive, that promotes not picking right? And we have a political incentive, which is the way that the politics balances right, that promotes polarization of rallying the base. Whenever you're rallying the base, what you're saying is, "Hate the other guys, let's go fight."

Kurt Nelson 10:15

So we asked him, What can we do? Or better yet, what did he and Rob Willer do in the experiment to understand more about what perceptions are rallying the base and what can be done to minimize the effect on polarization, and if that can be scalable.

Sandy Pentland 10:32

So we did a very simple thing, which was we sampled people. We asked them were you Republican or Democrat? Right? And then we asked them a bunch of questions about their intent to subvert democracy. And then we had had seven questions, not a big deal, right? And then we had a little intervention, a little sort of gamified intervention, which is like five minutes. It's a quiz, you know, okay, what do if you're a Democrat, what do Republicans think about this? Right? And, you know, say, you know, do they actually eat babies? And yes or no, right? And what you discover is a couple things. One is that you discover that **both sides are equally, almost exactly equally, screwed up about the tenants on the other side.** It's like almost symmetric things, right?

Kurt Nelson 11:22

Wow, the metaperceptions of the other side.

Sandy Pentland 11:28

The metaperceptions are screwy on both sides, right? And it's this sort of radical, and they think the other side is much more radical and much more subverting. Which is just like the Cold War, right? "They're building nuclear weapons to wipe us out," right? That kind of thing thing, okay? And if you have them go through these things and sort of like, say, "Nope, you're wrong," You know, it's really only 3% or 5% or whatever. But what's really remarkable is that that little intervention changes people's attitude about the other side, It's polarization, and they're misunderstanding by a massive amount. Wow, by some measures, it's like 30% right? Okay, so, so this is like a five-minute thing, right? And if

you ask people a couple weeks later what sort of candidates they would vote for, and you give them platforms that represent these, you know, these extreme things, right? It turns out you've changed the way they vote too. Again, massively, also a couple weeks later, right? That's not permanent, no, but, but you got is, you got people to reframe the problem.

Kurt Nelson 12:35

Yeah, reframing the problem. And that is really important that many people think the other side is really out to pull the nuclear option when that's simply not true.

Tim Houlihan 12:47

And an intervention like telling them what the other side actually believes can reduce polarization. The trouble is that getting those results requires a lot of conversations. So we wanted to learn about the work that he did with Rob Willer and scaling these interventions.

Sandy Pentland 13:08

One is, is that the thing, like Princess, that we did, the things that Rob did, were largely on the internet. Okay? So, you know, yeah, sure, you could reach 100 million people. Not a problem, but first you have to get them to do it. Yeah, you know that that's another problem. And, and what occurred to me was that this is very much in the sort of flavor of what's being called **Digital Deliberative Democracy**. Okay, so there's a number of people who think that, gosh, why can't we, like, discuss this stuff online and find solutions to problems. And they built platforms. The most famous one is one that's called POLIS, named after the Greek city state recall POLIS, out of Taiwan. And it's being used in Australia, Europe and the US. And it's claimed that it actually causes depolarization and some sort of compromise consensus among populations around contentious issues. It's been used dozens and dozens of times. And if you look at it, it's pretty much the same thing as what we did in our study or what Rob did, right? So what you do is you have this, you know, question, people contribute comments, and these are mediated. So, they contribute comments. You cannot reply to a comment, so it's just comments. But what you can do is you could upvote other comments. Okay, so you can see the space of comments, you can upvote and down vote. Thanks. So think about what that did. Well, first of all, everybody has an equal voice. There's nobody. You can only post a couple times a day, that sort of thing, so you don't get these dominant voices, which I know are a big problem. So you've, you've gotten people to sort of educate themselves about what the other side is really saying. Is not what they've been told that they're saying. You've asked them to think about it enough to have a judgment up or down, right? And you've also introduced a little bit of a dynamic, which is people would like to have their comment be really popular, yeah, right. So, so if you're on the edge, you know, you might really believe this, all right, but you can see that you're on the edge and you're not going to win. Okay? So you might like compromise in certain ways to be able to get a lot more votes. And you suddenly, I mean, many people who are quite extreme believe that everybody believes the way they do, right? But you can see that this is just not true, right? So for the very first time, you could be disabused of what your compatriots think about, not just the other side.

Kurt Nelson 15:47

The concept behind deliberative democracy is really cool. It's like a way to crowdsource the best and most relevant information for us, it can have a positive influence on correcting our misperceptions about polarization.

Tim Houlihan 16:02

And like all online tools, the challenge isn't in making it available to millions of people. It's getting millions of people to use it. They'll only get to see that many, even most people, are not so extreme, if we can go out and get them to try it, until then, perception is reality.

Kurt Nelson 16:19

To expand on this fundamental understanding that polarization is more about perception than it is reality, let's hear from David Rand. Dave is the Professor of Management Science, Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT. He's also the director of the Applied Cooperation Initiative. He's concerned about the intersection of misinformation and polarization, and he's going to expand on the idea that polarization is to a large degree in the minds of the beholder.

Tim Houlihan 16:52

Yeah, and it's not so much about the actual policies. Dave introduces us to two new terms, **issue or attitude polarization** and **affective polarization**, while the issue or attitude polarization is real, it doesn't have the dramatic negative impacts as affective polarization does. Affective polarization is about how we feel. That's the how we feel, part of polarization. And Dave is going to talk about its relationship to misinformation.

Dave Rand 17:21

One of them I'll call like issue polarization, or attitude polarization, which is how much people in the two parties disagree on substantive issues policies. And then the other is affective polarization, which is how much they dislike each other. And I think that there's probably not anything wrong with issue polarization. In fact, you know, like, whatever, half a century ago, the American Political Science Association put out some statement complaining that the parties weren't polarized enough and they should be more polarized so that they can better, like, give voters more unambiguous choices. But I think the affective polarization is the thing that is potentially problematic, because if you really hate the people on the other side and think they have bad intentions, then it makes it really hard to compromise. And compromise is like the essence of, you know, a lot of cooperative interactions. And also a core idea of democracy as an institution is to say I think that the institution is legitimate, and so even if I don't like the outcome of the election, I still support it, because I support the whole institution. And I think that that is something that affective polarization is potentially a real threat to, which is, if you think the people on the other side are evil, awful people that are, you know, have nefarious goals and don't respect the system, then you feel like, well, I can't respect the system. I can't have faith in the institution, because the other side is cheating. So like, I have to, you know, resort to their tactics. And so, a lot of where I sort of connect with polarization work that the intersection of misinformation and polarization.

Kurt Nelson 18:56

What's some of the research that you're doing there? And what do you what are some of the things that you're finding out?

Dave Rand 19:01

One of the general sort of views out there, held by many people and by many academics is that people purposely share false claims in order to promote political agendas. But our work suggests that actually, that is extremely uncommon, and it's much more likely that people are, like, either distracted or confused. Obviously, there are political actors out there who are bad actors that are purposely, you know, sharing bad things to try and, you know, do whatever. But like, for the average person, the average person isn't like, a willful spreader of misinformation in general. They're just not paying attention.

Kurt Nelson 19:40

Yeah, you mentioned the “forget to think” – I do that all the time.

Dave Rand 19:46

So I studied this, that this is, like, my core thing at least once, that I know because I got called out on it, I like, retweeted something because it was, like, amazing. And then a couple hours later, one of my colleagues responded and said, “Hey, is that true?” I was like, I did the thing! I did the thing that I study all the time!

Kurt Nelson 20:03

So, we asked Dave about the difference between disinformation and misinformation...

Tim Houlihan 20:09

And does it matter?

Dave Rand 20:10

Yeah, so the one definition is to say **disinformation is things where people purposely spread falsehoods. Misinformation is a thing where the poster doesn't know that it's false, but shares it accidentally.** That is an important distinction if you're trying to think about, how do you intervene on, you know, producers of misinformation. But I feel like mostly I study the sort of receiver or consumer side. And so if you're someone that is being exposed to misinformation, it doesn't really matter whether it was created intentionally or unintentionally. You don't know that. You don't have any access to intent. It's really hard to infer intent even as an external person. And so, I feel like for me, when I think about misinformation, I use it as an umbrella term for content that is inaccurate or misleading, essentially, content that, if you were exposed to it would cause you to have less accurate beliefs afterwards.

Kurt Nelson 21:01

Then Dave suggested that we could deal with misinformation, switching our thinking from, “Is this funny and should I pass it along?” to, “Is this accurate?” It's a different frame, and reframing often helps us make better decisions. We wanted to know how he's developing solutions for this.

Dave Rand 21:19

I think that, particularly in the misinformation space, our focus has largely been on working with tech companies and trying to get tech companies to implement changes. Because, you know, it's a place where you can really have a really large effect, and if they make one change, it affects, you know, everyone on the platform, essentially. And people often ask me, oh, do the platforms really care? Do they actually, like want to do anything about it? And the answer is that platforms aren't a single entity. Thousands of people that work there. And so the people that are on the misinformation teams really care a lot about it, and I think really are doing their best to try to figure out, what can we do. And then, if they have something that seems promising, they have to sell it up the chain and get sign off from the people at the top. It sort of seems like the further up the chain you get, you know, potentially, the less they actually care about it.

Tim Houlihan 22:16

And Dave found that he could circumvent the bureaucracy of the tech firms by simply using the social media site for his experiments as users with accounts.

Dave Rand 22:25

We did a lot of this on Twitter in, you know, pre-Musk. And to for example, we have this one paper where we created a bunch of accounts and we followed people that had been retweeting links to misinformation sites, so like low quality news sites, and then, you know, maybe 10% or so of them followed us back, just that's how Twitter works. And then we have those other followers. And then we can send direct messages to them as we sent them direct messages, basically just like prompting them to think about accuracy. And then we looked at the effect on what they subsequently shared, and it improved the improved the quality of the news sources that they shared. Fantastic.

Kurt Nelson 23:06

What research are you doing right now that's really interesting?

Dave Rand 23:09

I think one thing that I'm very excited about is work on the connection between polarization and combating misinformation. And so, you know, the primary way that platforms try and counter misinformation currently is partnering with professional fact checking organizations to identify claims that are false or misleading, and then they put warning labels on those claims. They down-rank the claims so people are less likely to see them, and helps inform their machine learning algorithms for like, you know what is probably bad, and then maybe they down-rank that stuff. And that's great. I'm, like, a very big fan of professional fact checking. The problem with professional fact checking is there just aren't enough fact checkers. Approximately infinite amount of content that's posted every day, and there's a handful of professional fact checkers in the US, and there's no professional fact checkers essentially, in much of the rest of the world, we've done a lot of work that suggests that you can harness the wisdom of crowds, and if you get a bunch of lay people to rate the content, any one lay person's rating not super helpful. But like, if you average the ratings of a bunch of lay people, you could actually do a pretty good job of matching what the fact checkers come up with.

Kurt Nelson 24:24

So, Dave is saying that we don't need to hire a bunch of fact checkers, that if we can set up a way to harness the wisdom of crowds, we can create a better internet experience that finds and roots out misinformation.

Tim Houlihan 24:39

Dave amplifies Sandy's message that groups of people can actually benefit our perceptions when the ones doing the commenting aren't the nut pickers.

Kurt Nelson 24:48

So, Sandy and Dave shared some powerful insights that can help us with some ways to think about the nature of polarization. And Tim, what did you take from this.

Tim Houlihan 25:01

My big takeaway is that disagreement is natural, so let's get over that. We need to have issue polarization, because it's natural and it's a good idea to challenge each other with opposing ideas.

Kurt Nelson 25:16

Around the issues, right? It's when it becomes effective polarization that idea that we hate the other side, or that the other side is out to get us, that part of polarization is the not healthy part of that.

Tim Houlihan 25:28

Yeah. Kurt, Kurt, what did you take away from that discussion?

Kurt Nelson 25:32

Well, there was this idea that crowdsourcing, right? This crowdsourcing came up in both Sandy and Dave's work, and suggested that the wisdom of crowds, that's a pretty good way to kind of impact this affective polarization in some instances.

Tim Houlihan 25:49

In some instances, right? Yeah, like Sandy's deliberative democracy thing is really cool, but at the heart of it, he and his colleagues are really trying to just treat affective polarization.

Kurt Nelson 25:59

Yeah. And ironically, we tend to experience or think about crowdsourcing often when it occurs in social media, when really that's not crowdsourcing, right? That idea of everybody coming together and social media and talking about an idea that's not that, that is more about social media promoting and amplifying the nut pickers, as Sandy says, And that's different than effective crowdsourcing, that when effective crowdsourcing, like Sandy did and Dave did when it's done, right, it can actually decrease effective polarization.

Tim Houlihan 26:36

Right. I also wanted to say that the political parties are intended to use the nut picking model to rally their bases, and it fosters this sense of conflict and animosity towards the opposing side, right? It's just terrible.

Kurt Nelson 26:53

Yeah, it's gone completely haywire, if you think about it, right? And you know, one of the interesting pieces, Tim, I mean, you would consider us, or would you consider us moderates on that political spectrum?

Tim Houlihan 27:05

I think I would, yeah.

Kurt Nelson 27:06

And you know, we're really trying to look for bipartisan solutions, kind of steering away from the fringe players who make those ridiculous claims that have no place in the real world. And I find that this nut picking aspect of it makes that harder, and we fall into that hole of going down those social media rabbit holes that just lead to, you know, fringe ideas, when, in fact, what we can be doing is bringing people together. And we may not like the solutions, but this is where that issue polarization is actually good. We can talk through issues without having the other person be evil incarnate.

Tim Houlihan 28:00

Yeah. Lastly, I'd just like to say that I think that the potential scalability of the interventions that we talked about suggests that we need continuous engagement and dialog. If we're going to depolarize over time, we have to continue to talk to people with opposing views and to focus, to get back to the very first thing, we started talking about issues and not emotions.

Kurt Nelson 28:27

So, to wrap up this groove, we want you, our listeners, to take an action if you read a social media post or hear something on the news that feels very demeaning of the other side or uses an *N* of one or a really small sample size to demonize the entirety of the other side, such as they always do this, whatever. Insert evil thing here, or everyone believes this. Just stop. Stop reading that post. Don't forward it on. Block the sender. Or better yet, push back with facts. Ask the person who posted it or say said this, that if they ever have experienced anyone from the other side who didn't do whatever evil thing was mentioned or they didn't hold that weird opinion.

Tim Houlihan 29:16

Remember that these types of nut picking examples are just that: nut picking. And that they are probably trying to manipulate you, so don't allow that to happen. Well, let's turn to the psychological dynamics involved in polarization. And next we're going to hear from three researchers: Mina Cikara, Yip Lelkes, and Josh Greene.

Kurt Nelson 29:44

The first conversation is one we had with Mina about psychological roots of polarization and Mina's explanation of what meta perception is. Mina is a professor of psychology at Harvard University, and her research helped us get grounded in the psychological issues. Issues that underpin polarization.

Tim Houlihan 30:02

Let's start with Mina explaining what psychologists mean when they talk about perceptions and meta perceptions.

Mina Cikara 30:17

Perception is just what it is that I think about or the way that I see someone or something else. So for example, in the context of politics, if I'm a Republican, how I perceive Democrats. A metaperception bounces back. So metaperception is how I think, as a Republican, Democrats think about us – the Republicans. So it's that outward looking, but then reflecting back to ourselves.

Kurt Nelson 30:46

And why is that important as we're thinking about polarization?

Mina Cikara 30:50

I think one of the reasons that thinking about metaperceptions is important is because metaperceptions are an indicator of how likely we might be to get along. So if I think that you hate me and my group and everything that we do, even if I don't feel that way towards you, I might think that it's probably not a great idea to approach you, to try to make plans, to coordinate. I might be more likely to avoid you all together, to avoid an uncomfortable interaction. And that's the way that perceptions become real polarization. Perceptions about polarization can actually create actual polarization.

Tim Houlihan 31:30

It is the classic chicken or egg which came first. Meta perceptions are interesting, but Mina goes on to talk about what these incorrect meta perceptions can lead to.

Mina Cikara 31:41

I think, that it's a major contributor to a lot of fascinating and consequential social phenomena, not the least of which is why propaganda works, for example, right? So when you can pull on these negative exemplars of a single member or a single instance, and then that story can spread like wildfire. And why it is that, you know, people have disproportionate ideas about how likely any one member of a group is going to be is going to do a certain thing, you know. So people have really inaccurate beliefs about, for example, the impact of immigrants on local communities, right? People for reasons associated with propaganda campaigns and negative exemplars, those negative exemplars are really sticky. And they hang around. And they inform our beliefs about everybody else that's part of that group or that population. So, people tend to overestimate how likely, you know, for example, they'll get wrong that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes than resident, resident citizens. And it turns out the opposite is true, of course. Right? But because they've been fed so many stories about the counterfactual, they build that representation about all immigrants.

Tim Houlihan 32:49

The term **negative exemplars** sounds a lot like Sandy's explanation of nut picking. It

Kurt Nelson 32:56

sure does. Let's hear what she has to say about terms like political warfare.

Mina Cikara 33:01

I think lots of folks in political science and history, you know, contemporary history, have done a really interesting job of trying to figure out exactly when it is that the metaphor for politics moved from negotiations to war in the US. And that that's an incredibly toxic metaphor that really is, right? So I think that lots of places you see this kind of rhetoric. For example, I oftentimes, when I present this research, I'll give folks the example of mailers that I've seen, both from the Republican Party and also from the Democratic Party. "You know, join the war to fight back against them." "They hate you, and they're going to you know they're doing everything they can to suppress your rights!" And on one hand, I understand when those things are true. Yes, we should talk about them, but to speak about them in such a global way to constantly frame things in the metaphor of us versus them, we have to fight back to regain what we've what has been taken from us, that starts to become a pretty slippery slope.

Kurt Nelson 34:06

So, we asked Mina to give us an example.

Mina Cikara 34:09

So for example, you know, some work that we've done is really about attitudes, how much people from each party dislike or like each other. And I would argue that that probably has important implications for how well people can get along in their day to day lives, how comfortable they feel approaching people with different opinions, how comfortable people are engaging in disagreement, which I would argue is very different from war, and so on and so forth. But is it going to change people's beliefs about democratic backsliding? Is it going to change their preferences around political violence? I'm not so sure. Is it going to have an effect if, even if we depolarize the citizenry, would it have the intended effects of letting people have it sort of greasing the social wheels, if you will, in their day to day lives, if elites continue to. Film that this kind of inaccurate amount of perception.

Tim Houlihan 35:02

Mina brings up an important question about the general dynamics of polarization. Is it even possible that the political elites, you know, the parties and the media companies, actually want voters to become less polarized?

Kurt Nelson 35:15

It's a good question, because the elites have a huge motivation to keep our country in the us-versus-them state of mind. And we wanted to know if Mina believed there were more actionable ways to apply this.

Mina Cikara 35:30

I think so. And well, if you specifically target matter, perceptions about behavior, what I think the other side is going to *do* to us, not how I think they feel about us, but what they are going to do to us that actually can move the needle on political violence. So when you tell folks you think that the other political party is, you know, 25% out of 100 likely to support political violence and engage in political violence against your party. And you say, we polled a bunch of those folks, and they actually told us that the likelihood or the strength of their endorsement of those things is *vanishingly small*. That helps a lot, because it deescalates. It deals with the security dilemma problem, filling in that informational

vacuum where you can only assume the worst, and instead it says, no, no, slow down, cool off. They are not actually that likely to engage in these things, and so therefore you don't have to escalate your preferences.

Kurt Nelson 36:23

This sounded complex, even daunting. So we asked her, how should we think about this?

Mina Cikara 36:32

You know, we have this motto in our lab, but if it's good for us, scientifically, if we find something in the context of intergroup violence, it's usually something bad for the world. And if we find, if we don't find, an effect that we have thought we would observe, it's usually something good for the world. So we're always winning. It's the way that we try to frame it. It's a little optimistic.

Kurt Nelson

It's a good frame! It keeps you, keeps you motivated.

Mina Cikara 36:57

That's right. So, so of course, of course, it's terribly daunting. And of course, the thing that I also try to stress is, much as we would love for all of these lessons that we learn in any one context in time to be generalizable to others: **context matters**. It also matters in the exact same conflict, whether you are immediately pre conflict, in conflict, post conflict, two decades post conflict, all of these things matter. And so it's, it's very, very it's, yeah, it's incredibly challenging problem. But I'm heartened, for example, to see, you know, this room full of brilliant people all putting so much intellectual and financial effort to trying to figure it all out. And that's true across the academy and you know, so many other institutions and organizations.

Kurt Nelson 37:50

Okay, Tim, now that we know that negative exemplars work to engage us, could our beliefs drive the choice of what group or groups we want to be associated with such as, I like to eat healthy food, and that might lead me to support organic farmers and farmers markets.

Tim Houlihan 38:07

Yeah, but my I like to eat healthy food stance might also be at odds with my desire for less regulated markets, because organic foods and organic farms are highly regulated. So how do we reconcile this so we asked another one of the organizers, Yip Lelkes, to who is a professor of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, to walk us through this problem.

Kurt Nelson 38:30

Yeah, Yip shares some of the more nuanced ways of thinking about our topic. Like, is polarization a static state of being, or is it moving like a trend.

Tim Houlihan 38:40

He also challenges us to think about the varying ways that polarization exists in the world. He wants to call attention to how political elites create and experience polarization on different levels and in different degrees than individual voters.

Kurt Nelson 38:56

Oh, and he's also the director of the polarization research lab in the Annenberg School at Penn. In other words, this stuff about polarization is his main gig. Now let's hear what he has to say about his findings on polarization.

Yph Lelkes 39:12

So, one question is often, do people choose their group and then, you know, follow their group's policy position? Or, you know, the more traditional view is, you know, I'm pro life, so therefore I become a Republican. So kind of trying to sort that out has been a big part of what I've done the past few years. One truism in public opinion research is that **most people don't have strong attitudes on most things, and so they follow political elites**. And political elites are there to tell us kind of what goes with what so political elites say, Okay, well, you're a Republican and you believe in abortion, so now you also believe this. Yeah, and the more political. Be engaged you are, the more cohesive your ideological packages.

Kurt Nelson 40:05

So, Yip is saying that most people don't have strong attitudes about things, but they can take on the attitudes of their aligned party, particularly the more engaged that they are. Yip expanded on this, and we talked about how polarization could be thought of as a system or a distribution. And then he brings up this very interesting idea that polarization can be..

Yph Lelkes 40:28

..**both a trend, yeah, and it can be a state**. Okay, so right now, are we in a polarized state? Right? Is the America polarized or and then, is America polarizing? Right? And both, I don't know how you can answer the first without thinking about like, where we were in the past, right? You have to think about like. How, if you want, if your question is, How bad are things in America? You really have to look at the kind of the pattern of polarization over time. So there's that aspect of it. Another definition of polarization can be **the absence of a shared reality**, right? And so this applies, and maybe that's a consequence of polarization, but democratically, like having a shared reality is important, because we can sit around we are on the same we we're coming together with the same facts.

Kurt Nelson 41:28

The idea that polarization can be thought of as either a state or a trend is interesting and informs how we need to think about it. But the concept that polarization can be thought of as an absence of a shared reality really strikes home. How will democracy survive if we don't even see reality in the same way?

Tim Houlihan 41:47

Yeah, so we can see how this is moving the country farther apart on many issues. We wanted to know how we got there.

Yph Lelkes 41:56

What has happened is **ideological sorting**, which is, and this is another. Some people say this is not polarization. My mind seems like, if you're talking about polarization being an absence of shared reality,

this is one is Democrats now only hold liberal positions. Republicans only hold conservative positions. You used to have, you know, a pro-life Democrat was not unheard of 20 years ago. You know, maybe even 10 years ago, and now, you know, that's not a thing. If I know you're a Democrat, I can predict your policy positions really, really well, right? So where ideology and party used to be more orthogonal or uncorrelated, now, if you tell me your party, I can do a really good job at predicting what policy positions you hold, even if they're not more extreme.

Tim Houlihan 42:54

The concept of ideological sorting is interesting because ideological sorting isn't how we humans operate. We can hold a conservative view on one issue and liberal values on another issue. It's inconsistent with the human condition, and thus it creates the absence of a shared reality and who we are as individuals.

Kurt Nelson 43:18

For our last guest in this first episode, let's turn to Josh Greene, who is a professor of psychology at Harvard. In addition to being an experimental psychologist, Josh is also a neuroscientist, philosopher, and he studies moral judgment and decision making primarily using behavioral experiments and functional neuroimaging or fMRI.

Tim Houlihan 43:40

Josh is the author of *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason and the Gap Between Us and Them*, and he tees up the issue slightly differently than Sandy, Dave Yip and Nina. Josh gets into the psychological dynamics of polarization with a very practical approach.

Kurt Nelson 43:57

Let's start with Josh describing what he sees as the major effects of polarization. He begins with his biggest concerns, that we humans are not built for it. And then he notes that polarization is more than just a little short-term animosity. It's more of a long-term thing.

Josh Greene 44:16

Well, like a lot of people, I'm very worried about the state of politics and democracy in the United States, but the animosity in the United States has been growing, and there's a debate about what the downstream effects of that are. But from my read on the literature, I think it's clear that that animosity, that distrust, that lack of respect, is really dangerous. The story of life on Earth is all about cooperation and competition at increasing levels of complexity. Molecules come together to form cells. Cells form colonies and simple animals, and then you have social animals, and animals with more complex social structures and humans and hunter-gatherer bands and chiefdoms and nations and nation states, and even occasionally United Nations. Right? **And what binds all of that together at every step is those parts that come together can survive better and do more together than they can separately.**

Kurt Nelson 45:11

So Josh shows how we successfully evolve by leveraging our human desire for cooperation. But how does competition fit into this?

Josh Greene 45:20

But it's not all a cakewalk, because at every level there's competition, as well. And in fact, **it is the competition that drives the teamwork that enables success**. As someone who thinks about evolution, I thought, okay, mutually beneficial cooperation is the key to bringing people together. And this is not only not a new idea in biology, it's not a new idea in the social sciences. There's a long history, whether it's in, say, psychology, going back to a famous book and ideas from Gordon Allport known as The Contact Hypothesis, you bring people together, but not just under any circumstances, under the right conditions, where there are shared goals, where there is a kind of sanction from above, or there's people are communicating in an equal level, right? That's when good things happen.

Tim Houlihan 46:07

So, competition can be channeled, and that can lead to mutually beneficial cooperation if the right conditions exist.

Kurt Nelson 46:16

But we'll explore those conditions more in the next two episodes. For now, let's just groove on what we've heard from Mina, Yip and Josh. Okay, Tim, so Mina showed us that our behaviors are influenced by what we think others think of us, or metaperceptions, as she calls it, in particular, how we think that they will treat us particularly when those people are on the other team, when they're not on our team. And the big picture, the big outcome of this, is that we get that wrong, right?

Tim Houlihan 46:58

Okay, yeah: Boom. Full stop. Boom, right? Yeah, we get that wrong. That that, I think that that's just a really important thing to bring up, and we're going to talk about this more in episode three as well. But, but, you know, we tend to believe anyway, because it's easier for us to do that. It's easier for the political elites to manipulate us and use that to create more of this, us-versus-them modality.

Kurt Nelson 47:27

Yeah, so this, this, this idea that we believe the other side is going to treat us bad. The political elites can use that against us. It makes it easier for them to bring in those negative exemplars, or, as you like to call them, the nut pickers, as Sandy says, right? That that then become more effective, because we go, oh yeah, I already thought they don't like us. And look, that one person you know did this crime against us, and that was politically motivated. Everybody on the other side must think that way. And so this idea of metaperceptions and the negative exemplars: those are ways that we get manipulated, right? Those are ways that our **confirmation bias** actually comes in and plays on the negative opinions that we already hold, and just, you know, magnify that, so.

Tim Houlihan 48:26

Another thing that about this, that I think was really interesting, that Yip brought in, was, it's the big irony in this is that most of us don't actually have strong opinions on a lot of things. Yeah, because, like, the world is complicated and we're complex. But we need simplicity. So Right? Go for what's the easiest way to deal with this, right?

Kurt Nelson 48:50

So, we follow the tribe, right? We follow, we follow what we're told, because we don't hold strong opinions, right? Therefore, those opinions are easily manipulated. Hearing me here, that's the common theme here about this manipulation, right? And as you said, We're complex human beings. It's difficult, it's too hard for us to really go out and research all these things. So, all right, I'm part of this group. They've obviously done the research on this, and I agree with them on this point and that point, so I must agree with them on all these points, but yet we know that's not how we operate as humans. That is not us. We can have conservative views on one point, as we talked about earlier, and liberal views on another, or most of the time we're somewhere in between. We are not at the ends of the spectrum, and I think that's really important. Right?

Tim Houlihan 49:38

Yeah, the lastly, I think that we have to think about the way that we've prospered as a species is ultimately through collaboration, right? That's the core of what got humans way ahead of everybody else, is that we built things together, we shared ideas, all that kind of stuff. Cooperation is really central to who we are, right? But, and we've done this, not just with the people who were close to but with people who were not close to.

Kurt Nelson 50:09

Exactly. That's the big thing. When civilizations have been successful, it's because they have overcome their differences on the issues, or moderated the issue polarization, as we've talked about, that that isn't necessarily the bad part of this. We can definitely hold different opinions on the issues. It is when we have the affective polarization, or, as Yip said this, when we don't have a shared view of reality. That's when cooperation gets really difficult and leads to a whole bunch of problems, as we're seeing right now.

Tim Houlihan 50:49

Yeah, that that doesn't bode well, yeah. So I guess that that leads to the question of, What can we do? What? What should we be asking our listeners to be thinking about and doing?

Kurt Nelson 50:59

So first, **we don't understand what the other side thinks as well as we think we do.** In other words, we have this misperception of the meta perception of we hold right, all right. That was a bad way of saying that. But anyway, we need to get past that. We need to have an open conversation with the other side that are not biased by our preconceived opinions and beliefs. And so the way to do this, at least in my opinion, Tim, is to get out there and talk to others. Right? That old high school classmate who you see all those posts on Facebook or whatever social media platform you are that go, Oh, my God, this is crazy. Well, call them, talk to them, get a conversation going that allows you to maybe change some of your preconceived ideas about them, and then change some of their preconceived ideas about you, ask questions. Don't get into an argument, just talk. Have that conversation. So they go, yeah, I remember you. You were cool guy. Yeah, you're a cool guy too. We're pretty we're still pretty cool, all right. Well, tl was never a cool guy, but that was like, Oh yeah, you got cooler. Maybe, maybe.

Tim Houlihan 52:13

I was never a cool guy.

Kurt Nelson

Yeah, whatever. What else?

Tim Houlihan 52:18

Well, the second thing is that I think that it is important that we **remember that we do have our own opinions**, and **we should form our own opinions and not let them be formed for us**. So if we actually feel and we think and we've thought about something and we're not really sure about x sitting next to y and z, then don't have that opinion be formed for you that x is definitely going to go with y and z. We are humans. We have a variety of beliefs. We're complex. We can have we can be a conservative with a liberal viewpoint on something. We can be a liberal with a conservative viewpoint on something. That's okay, right? It, we just don't always have to follow the herd.

Kurt Nelson 53:04

Right. I think part of that, Tim is that we don't think about our opinions very often. We don't think about how we think about things. And so as Yip said, then we're more modifiable, right? This is, then we're more likely to follow that that tribe or the herd. And so I think this is one of those things where, if we just take some time, slow down and go: What do I think about that issue or that policy, or whatever that is, how does that fit with what I how I view the world from my lens? We're going to be less likely to be influenced. Which, again, brings me to this final thing, right? Is trying to understand that the political elites are trying to get us angry and to split us up. It's in their best interest. They are incented to do that. And remember, we are more aligned than we think, and don't let them, the media, the policy, the politicians, don't let them make you hate each other.

Tim Houlihan 54:20

Beautifully said Kurt. Okay, so listeners now that you're better informed, and we know that knowledge might not be the whole thing, but get out there and use that knowledge to help face this problem head on.

Kurt Nelson 54:36

So are we doomed to live in an ever downward spiral of more and more polarization. Are we stuck in this negative loop that we won't be able to get out of? Is there no hope? Tim, is there no hope?

Tim Houlihan 54:53

Wow, Downer Debbie!

Kurt Nelson 54:57

I don't know: Is there?

Tim Houlihan 55:00

You and I don't think so. We don't believe that that's the case. Neither do the researchers that we talk to. There is hope. We can get out of this doom and gloom and have better less affective polarization, leading to more cooperation and better outcomes. I think Yip says it best.

Yph Lelkes 55:20

One truism in public opinion research is that most people don't have strong attitudes on most things, and so they follow political elites. And political elites are there to tell us kind of what goes with what.

Tim Houlihan 55:30

Next time, we'll share discussions with a bunch more researchers from the conference, including some observations from economists. Now, economists have a particularly useful way of looking at problems. Oftentimes, they're more focused on what people do than what they say they're going to do.

Kurt Nelson 55:46

Aside from some great conversations, we're going to introduce you to the Robbers Cave studies, some groundbreaking research that helped shine some light on polarization from many, many years ago, and it should help set the stage for our interviews. What

Tim Houlihan 56:02

the Robbers Cave studies? This is gonna be cool.

Kurt Nelson 56:06

It sounds very cool, but you're gonna have to just listen to Episode Two to learn all about it. So with that, Groovers, we hope you check out the next two episodes in our series on polarization.