## Episode 2

# TITLE TBD

**SPEAKERS**

Kwabena Donkor, Ryan Enos, Eugen Dimant, Tim Houlihan, and Kurt Nelson

**Tim Houlihan** 00:07

In Oklahoma during the summer of 1954, a social psychologist named Muzafer Sherif hosted a camp for 22 boys. But unbeknownst to them, the camp was really an experiment where the camp counselors were researchers.

**Kurt Nelson** 00:21

The boys were all similar. They were all white, 11- and 12-year-olds who had never previously met. Each came from a two parent, middle class Protestant family. The researchers wanted to keep the two groups as well matched as possible.

**Tim Houlihan** 00:35

Prior to arriving at the camp, the researchers randomly divided the boys into two groups. The groups were picked up in separate busses and brought to two different areas of the camp. Each group was unaware that the other group was even at the camp.

**Kurt Nelson** 00:50

The study was designed in three phases. The first phase was the In-Group Formation Phase, designed to have the boys get to know each other and form bonds within their group. Each group slept in their own large bunkhouse. The boys chose team names. One called themselves the Rattlers, and the other group called themselves the Eagles.

**Tim Houlihan** 01:08

They spent the first few days playing fun games, exploring and working together on common activities. They quickly and easily began to bond with their team and to identify themselves as either Rattlers or Eagles, each team formed their own culture and group norms.

**Kurt Nelson** 01:25

For the first five days, the two groups were kept separate, but then Sherif introduced the two groups to each other, where they were placed in competition. This was phase two of the experiment: The Friction Phase. Valued Prizes were awarded to the winners of these competitions, and it didn't take long to see hostility emerging between the two teams, name calling, and threats of physical violence bubbled up.

**Tim Houlihan** 01:52

In fact, at times it got pretty heated. When the researchers looked at where the friendships that the boys had were strongest, they found that 93% of the friendships were in-group, Rattlers with Rattlers, Eagles with Eagles, the outgroup, ie, whoever wasn't on my team was seen as the other.

**Kurt Nelson** 02:11

So is this just the natural outcome of different identities? Would the Eagles and rattlers always only be loyal to their own group? Would they continue to view each other as competitors that they needed to beat? Is human nature such that these two groups would always see each other as different? Welcome to behavior groups. I'm Kurt Nelson.

**Tim Houlihan** 02:39

And I'm Tim Houlihan. This is part two of our three part series on polarization. In the first episode, we explored some basics about polarization, how it's on the rise, and what scientists are doing to address it.

**Kurt Nelson** 02:51

In this episode, we examined the root causes of polarization from the perspectives of four researchers we met and interviewed at the MIT Polarization Conference in December of 2023. We're going to hear about the psychological dynamics of polarization, the interplay between misinformation, polarization and democracy, and we'll hear about some solutions that behavioral science might offer us.

**Tim Houlihan** 03:14

But let's start this episode with a discussion about the psychological dynamics of polarization. We'll get back to the Robbers Cave study in a bit, but first, let's talk human nature.

**Kurt Nelson** 03:25

Okay, Tim, our genetic code has developed over millions of years, and it's as much in our nature to cooperate as it is to oppose. Cooperation has helped humans create and build things other animal species have not. On the other hand, opposition has kept us safe within our groups, but our genetic makeup is more than 70,000 years old and is well adapted to dealing with small tribes that were pretty cohesive during any one person's lifetime. The world is more complex today. For one thing, we're more mobile, so modern humans need to figure out ways to adapt these old genetic tools to deal with the modern world.

**Tim Houlihan** 04:02

Agreed. Kurt, so let's hear from Ryan Enos. Ryan is a social scientist in the governmental studies department at Harvard University. He's going to share his thoughts about the ways geography impact polarization.

**Kurt Nelson** 04:15

Yeah, let's just start with this question, does where you live influence how polarized your world is?

**Ryan Enos** 04:21

yes, it does. What we can see in the way we measure polarization, which we can talk more about, is people in different places appear to be more polarized, at least they're more toxic towards members of the other political party in the United States, in this case. And, based on the statistical techniques we use, we think it's place that is driving that it's not features of the people that are there or anything like that. It's that their behavior is actually a function of where it is that they live, and that's causing them to be more toxic toward people in other political parties. And there could be a lot of different mechanisms that are going on here, but we see that, for example, you might react to the new partisan mix in your area. So you could go to new area, and this is we could see, like among Republicans, for example, that if they move to a place, and that place becomes more Republican, that they're that they're the what we measure is toxicity is exactly what we're measuring. And so it's sort of the toxic way in which they talk about Democrats.

**Tim Houlihan** 05:18

Andwhile Ryan notes that the implications from the research are strong. They are by no means 100% conclusive.

**Ryan Enos** 05:25

We don't know all the implications yet, but I think that one thing for the average person to remember is that the way we behave, and this is true of toxicity, is true of things that we might think we don't want to do, like, you know, kind of hate our fellow Americans, that that a lot of that can be a function of where we live. That we are influenced by our environment. And I think we often so that awareness can be important for what shapes our behavior if we think this is something that we don't want to do. And I think we often don't know that about ourselves, like we think, you know, we're good, independent thinking people, and we have, you know, real reasons that we like somebody we don't like somebody. And of course, those reasons may be real, but it's important to know where those influences come from. And some of that influence can be from where we live.

**Kurt Nelson** 06:07

If we were to look back 20 to 30 years ago, we imagine there would be less polarization than there is today. We asked Ryan if polarization is getting worse.

**Ryan Enos** 06:18

Actually, it's a good question, and it's something I think a lot about. And one reason, I think it's a good question, is, of course, one of the, one of the maybe natural habits we have, is always saying things are worse now than ever. Exactly, everything with time, happy with kids these days,

**Kurt Nelson**

Back in my day!

**Tim Houlihan**

Yeah!

**Ryan Enos**

You know, we all got along. Everything was perfect, right? And of course, you know, on one hand, of course, we know that's not true. You know, there's always been fight around politics and but, but from a social science perspective, we want to really examine those claims. We want understand, if, you know, if, in fact, things have gotten worse. Because I think a lot of us have this intuition that it is, but we need to separate that from the just like back in my day, everything, yeah, the rosy, yeah, calf, whatever that is. And so that evidence is a little hard to sort out, of course, because our social science tools have gotten so much better. And so when we say these things, like we see these survey measures where, like it's you're much less likely to want your child, to measure to marry into somebody from another party. That's real, that we also have to keep it. We can see that. But our also, our data from back in, let's say, the 60s, was actually kind of shaky. We asked that like, once again, once, sort of common. We asked it again, and the question is a little different, yeah, and, and so, you know, the evidence for this isn't as overwhelmingly good as we might think. On the elite - that's on the math level, right? We have many more surveys now than we once did. On the elite level, like members of Congress and people like that, we can certainly see that they vote together a lot, lot less. So all those things are hints that sort of polarization. The ingredients of polarization are there, how much that affects how much we really don't like each other, how much of the contributor to those are a little more difficult.

**Tim Houlihan** 07:55

And at the same time, there is evidence, actual data, that shows us that where we live is becoming more polarized, red states getting redder, and blue states getting bluer, which, as Ryan points out, means that the number of battleground states is shrinking. But what does all of this mean?

**Ryan Enos** 08:12

A lot of this goes back to the conversation about stereotypes that come up during that when we think about polarization and we think about intergroup conflict, we tend to trade on stereotypes, and it's easy to think of things as more extreme than they are. And we think the same thing can be true of states, because even if you go to the most blue of blue states, which is actually a place like Massachusetts, it's still the case that about maybe three and a half out of every four people are a Republican. You know? And if you go to the most red of red states, like, let's say Wyoming, you know, out about every three out of 10 people are Democrats. So it's not like, you know, you you have to search around for these people like they don't exist. And the fear is, again, you know, we have to be cautious with these claims. We don't want to overstate them. We don't want to make it seem like it's worse than it is.

**Tim Houlihan** 08:55

So while Ryan's evidence is strong that where we live influences polarization, the evidence is not so conclusive on if there is more polarization, and we need to make sure we don't over index on this.

**Kurt Nelson** 09:08

We need to keep in mind that even in the reddest of red or the bluest of blue states, there are still lots of people from the other party who live there. We are still all Americans.

**Tim Houlihan** 09:26

Okay, Kurt, so when we think about our conversation with Ryan, this where you live matters is a really cool and important thing to think about, right? It influences us beyond our ability to easily notice because we're living where we're living, right? So we have to pay attention to what others say, how they act. All of those things are really key to it.

**Kurt Nelson** 09:47

It’s the you know, “ask a fish about the water that they live in, and they go, what water?” Right? We don't even understand the elements that surround us. Again, in my neighborhood. If I was to look out at all the political signs that are in my neighborhood, they are all on one side of the political spectrum. There are very few that are on the other side. If I travel out into a different part of the state that I live in, in Minnesota, it's a very different piece, and you see only the other side of the political signs, so you can see how this happens.

**Tim Houlihan** 10:29

It's also something that I want to reinforce, that the evidence of the trending of polarization getting stronger or weaker is just not terribly strong, because the questions have changed right from 1964 to 2024 we can't really accurately say it's definitely getting worse, it's definitely getting better, it's definitely staying the same. Because the questions themselves have actually changed. So in general, though, I think it's fair to say that the voters are probably not as polarized as the media would like us to believe.

**Kurt Nelson** 11:04

And this idea that when we look at what is actually going on in those neighborhoods, they're not that different from, you know, 50 years ago, right? What is going on. We still help our neighbors. We still talk with them, regardless of their political affiliation. We don't talk about that so much there. So, I think that is important too. The other piece that Ryan brought up is this idea that **affective polarization is toxic**, right? There is an emotional part of this polarization, which we heard in our first episode as well, that how I feel about the other side is really about me, I think Ryan said, right? This is, this is an aspect of it gets into a very interesting element and isn't positive.

**Tim Houlihan** 12:02

You and I have talked about this idea of, like, would we cook a recipe from that we get from a member of the opposite team? Right? Like, if someone, like, I love salmon. And if, if you're on the other team and you say, well, I've got a really good Salmon Recipe, if I start to get to the point where I say I'm not even going to look at that recipe, because you're from the other team that is affective polarization at its worst, right?

**Kurt Nelson** 12:29

The aspect of the recipe has no bearing on whether or not I align with you on your political or other beliefs. It is only and only important about how good that recipe is, and yet we would dismiss somebody even if it's the best recipe in the world, if we have affective polarization to that extent.

**Tim Houlihan** 13:00

But the issue polarization, like having diverse thinking in our country is a good thing, right? He's saying that we can't live in this, this tunnel, this echo chamber of everybody thinks the same way I do, because that actually doesn't lead to our individual happiness, right?

**Kurt Nelson** 13:17

This idea that we all align on the issues, is not right. And the idea that we can actually learn from each other is really important. That if I have a point of view on an issue, and you have a point of view on an issue, and we share those points of view, and we discuss them in a reasonably well informed, purposeful, well-intentioned manner, we can learn from each other. And hopefully that we can come to a better solution, as opposed to my solution or your solution. Well, this

**Tim Houlihan** 14:00

whole idea of geography gets me thinking about a couple of questions. And the first one is like, have you lived in the same neighborhood for the past 2010, or 20 years, you know? And has it changed? Have you moved recently? Maybe you, maybe you've moved recently. I have.

**Kurt Nelson** 14:16

I was gonna say this seems like a me question here, Tim, this is very much about you.

**Tim Houlihan** 14:23

But how much has changed, you know, right in the in the neighborhood where you're living, and really, has it changed all that much? Or are you seeing differences that, basically, our minds are kind of making up?

**Kurt Nelson** 14:36

Okay, Tim, now that we know that where we live makes a difference. What might an economist have to say about how identity and beliefs contribute to polarization?

**Tim Houlihan** 14:55

It's a good question. Kurt, we tend to think of economists as watching out for big economic. Economic trends, big numbers, big measurements, not really developing research studies in labs or running field experiments, but they do, as behavioral scientists, they try to parse out the differences between what we say our preferences are and how we actually behave.

**Kurt Nelson** 15:15

This is what we call the intention action gap, and there's a lot of great literature on that. This economist is trying to do the same thing, but in his own way.

**Kwabena Donkor** 15:26

So my name is Kwabena Donkor, and I'm at Stanford Graduate School of Business.

**Tim Houlihan** 15:30

Kwabena got his PhD in economics, and he teaches in the marketing department at Stanford. Now he's researching the relationship between identity, beliefs, our preferences, and the choices we make.

**Kurt Nelson** 15:42

The interesting question, as I mentioned earlier, is, how would an economist approach this conversation on polarization.

**Kwabena Donkor** 15:50

As economists, when we're thinking about how people make choices, what we would do is we would observe people's actions or choices within the data set. And once you observe choices, there are two things that can explain why someone made that particular choice. One is that their beliefs is what drove the choice that they made, or the other one is that their preferences drove that particular action or choice.

**Tim Houlihan** 16:18

The way Kwabena is talking about this, a belief is what a person expects will happen. It's basically a prediction, while a preference is what the person would want to happen. So the belief is like, I can see the polls indicate that my candidate is behind, so I expect my candidate will lose, but my preference is that I want my candidate to win.

**Kwabena Donkor** 16:40

In economics, and I think most other social sciences, you'd have to make an assumption about, what do you think about how beliefs impacted that choice before you can say something about what your preferences are. Which is, how did they rank different things and therefore ended up picking one particular thing?

**Tim Houlihan** 16:59

So preferences follow beliefs?

**Kwabena Donkor** 17:03

Well, they don't have to follow but they operate together and so and so, that's why it's so important for us to when we observe people's choices, we need to be very clear in our minds, like, what combination of beliefs versus preferences is driving that particular action that we saw in order to be able to make effective policy.

**Kurt Nelson** 17:21

This is a big aha, but how did he research it?

**Tim Houlihan** 17:25

Kwabena developed a study to help reveal this connection by using his favorite sport, soccer, or football, as it's called in his native Ghana, to reveal people's actual preferences, not the preferences they tell you about in a survey.

**Kurt Nelson** 17:39

So he put them in situations to make choices that mattered. He asked them to make bets with real money.

**Tim Houlihan** 17:46

Yeah, and with each bet comes certain odds of winning and losing. No one wants to lose money, so everyone's gonna pick likely winners, right? Well, but at the same time, you love your favorite team, and you might want to show loyalty to your team by betting on them, even if they're not favored to win. Yeah, would you stick with your favorite team even if it meant losing money?

**Kurt Nelson** 18:10

So, to test this, he used 20 games of the Premier League season, and he controlled what games you could bet on and what the odds were for each of the matches. In other words, he could adjust the odds to make betting for or against your home team the best way to win.

**Kwabena Donkor** 18:28

But in soccer, at least, I don't. I think this is true in the US, too, but at least in Europe, people are quite religious about the teams that they support, right? And so they identify with certain teams.

**Tim Houlihan**

It’s a “to the grave.”

Kwabena Donkor

Exactly, and people actually buried in their regalia from their team. And so here what I can have is I can have a person make bets on a game, on the games that are being played, played over the weekend, right? But I can have you bet on games where you're neutral because you don't care about any of the two day two teams that are playing. Or I can have you make bets about a game where one of you support one of the teams. Well, what does that buy us? You can’t vote in an election where you're neutral, like it just not possible. But in order to be able to say your biased or your beliefs are different, or preferences are different, we need to be able to observe what you would do when you're unbiased. And then now I can compare you against these objective predictions that are actually out there in the world, and see, well, when you support the team, what do your forecasts look like, and when you're neutral, what does your forecast look like. And so now we have some way of saying, okay, well, this is what your beliefs look like. And then after that, then I give you money and I say, well, these are the potential outcomes of the game. Why don't you bet. The experimental variation is the following: I choose what the return to any of those outcomes would be, which is, I can make it. Really lucrative for you to bet against your team? Yeah, right, and see whether you're willing. And that would tell me something about your preferences. Of course, when you support a team, you believe that you know they're way better than they actually are. So, when the bookmakers say that your team is likely not to do well, that's when you're even more of a confident.

**Tim Houlihan** 20:20

So, what he found is that our preferences impacted our beliefs. Even when bookmakers indicated I would lose money by betting on my team, I tend to double down to show loyalty to my team.

**Kurt Nelson** 20:32

And this is how it ties back to the way our beliefs and preferences play into our behaviors. My preferences in my team is a strong contributor to how much I'm willing to support them, even when the odds are against them, even to the point of losing money.

**Tim Houlihan** 20:48

But I really like the idea that he's been looking at this from the perspective of, what do people actually do when it comes to their biases and their preferences.

**Kurt Nelson** 21:01

And it's interesting, when we think about this, the impact that we're not always rational, right? And we've been studying this in sales incentives for many years, this idea that just throwing more money at something doesn't necessarily equate to increases in motivation or engagement or other factors around this, this idea of risk as well, the idea that backcountry skiers going into, you know, highly risky avalanche places, right? You know, people do that!

**Tim Houlihan** 21:41

And it's being studied by economists, no less. Yeah, right. I think that was Auden Hetlund and Andrea Mannberg, right? Like, like they're actually studying these irrational behaviors from an economic perspective, economist perspective.

**Kurt Nelson** 22:01

Listeners, you can go back to Episode 199 if you want to hear more about that. But this is the interesting part. And I think what Kwabena brings up is this idea that, hey, there is an economic reality that says, hey, I'm a Homer. I will, I will actually take a riskier bet on my home team, because they're my home team, and not look at all of the factors and be very rational about this.

**Tim Houlihan** 22:34

So the consequences of this affective polarization is that I might be less likely to do something that's in my best self-interest when it comes to how I feel about the opposing team?

**Kurt Nelson** 22:47

Yeah, that's really important when we think about polarization as a whole. That we will make decisions that are not in our best interest because we have this effective polarization that is clouding our judgment. Okay, let's get on to our third interview to help us understand the consequences, or some other consequences, of polarization.

**Tim Houlihan** 23:21

Eugen Dimant is an economist at the University of Pennsylvania who emigrated from Moldova following this collapse of the Soviet Union. During his lifetime, he's seen how brutal governmental regimes have polarized citizens and caused tremendous upheaval around the world. This perspective deeply informs his work.

**Kurt Nelson** 23:41

And he is one of the creators of this remarkable conference on polarization. He is our generous friend who invited us to MIT after he got the speakers together and suggested that Tim and I come to hear what the researchers had to say.

**Tim Houlihan** 23:54

So we spoke to Eugen several months after the conference was held, but his passions were just as sharp as the chilly day in December that we met him at MIT in this recorded conversation, we began by trying to understand the comorbidities of polarization.

**Kurt Nelson** 24:11

And Eugen went right to the heart of it.

**Eugen Dimant** 24:13

You can think about polarization as something that affects the way we think about people, but it also affects the way we engage with people. It affects the way we sort of process information and accept new information or discard new information, and the interaction that it has with my deep rooted identity and my own preferences. And so I just started to realize that polarization is just such an all-encompassing feature of everyday life. And we don't really understand yet all the ways in which it impacts our beliefs and our ideas and our sort of goals. So, at the societal level, when we think about what are the important ingredients of society, at sort of the foundation of that is are the social preference that we know about, like the trust in each other, but also in institutions. It's the willingness to cooperate with each other, it's the willingness to help others. And so at the societal level, polarization really creates a rift where we are not willing to sort of look past those different political identities.

**Kurt Nelson** 25:24

And if all these things were intertwined, we realized that polarization could have a cascading effect on the way we get things done in government, and how willing we might be to help a stranger on the sidewalk in a neighborhood where we see either lots of Black Lives Matter, signs, or Trump 2024 signs.

**Tim Houlihan** 25:44

So, we asked him about why we have such a hard time cooperating with people across the political aisle from us.

**Eugen Dimant** 25:50

One reason could be we are just completely unwilling to work with others. We have different beliefs and different preferences. We support different political candidates, and because we do that, we just say, I'm completely unwilling to even just attempt to be cooperative with you. That's like one way in which you can think polarization could be detrimental. Other ways in which polarization could be detrimental is my belief that I think the other party, sort of partisans would screw me over whenever they get the opportunity, right? So even if I'm a nice guy, I anticipate they might not be nice to me. But the fact of the matter is that this research actually points to the fact that **we could collaborate and would be willing to collaborate with each other. It's just we don't anticipate that this collaboration would actually be fruitful.** And so that creates sort of a collapse of cooperation at the societal level, which we then see trickle down to the problems that we have. Sort of nowadays.

**Kurt Nelson** 26:45

We've talked a lot about reciprocity on Behavioral Grooves, mostly as a way to influence someone. But Eugen has an insight into reciprocity that actually prevents us from being influenced by someone else. It's because we naturally want to be nice to other people. It's in our DNA. But polarization holds us back because we don't think the other person or someone from the other side of the political spectrum is going to be nice back to us.

**Tim Houlihan** 27:17

Yeah. And this becomes a terrible loop that exacerbates polarization. More and more people start to feel the same way. But as we've heard from others in this series on polarization, there are plenty of folks out there whose position is far less strident and far more nuanced than the far right or far left stance. The fact there are far fewer nut pickers than we are led to believe. But what is the impact on those in the middle.

**Eugen Dimant** 27:47

If we think about what happens at the psychological level, for us to reaffirm our identity with our own political party, we need to constantly send signals to the people that are part of my identity, but also I'm looking for signals that are consistent with my view. And the easiest way to sort of coordinate and be aligned is to be firm in your position that these people are my side and these other people are on the other side, right? And this very middle, very little middle ground, and you don't actually try to bridge the Rift, because you're reaffirming your identity by just creating that rift.

**Kurt Nelson** 28:24

So what Eugen is saying is that there is a psychological value in not trying to find common ground with the other side, that the rift is easier.

**Eugen Dimant** 28:34

The challenge, of course, that comes from that, is that some people might actually be willing to bridge that gap, but because you want to be part of your identity and your group, you try to just reaffirm it without bridging that. And then the research agenda that we sort of started to create is, can we find ways to actually allow people to bridge that right, and can we find ways to bring people together, and often so to pull from sort of psychological research, there's this idea of **pluralistic ignorance**, right? So we might have certain beliefs about how we think other people think about us, but that might actually be different from reality. And so if there's a misalignment of reality in our beliefs, we can sort of leverage belief corrections to make people nicer.

**Kurt Nelson** 29:22

How do those beliefs play out when it comes to behaviors? We know that our behaviors are not always consistent with our beliefs or even our identities. Right, Tim?

**Tim Houlihan** 29:31

Right. We asked organ about this, and he came back to a term that we heard a lot of in this series, affective polarization. He talked about the impact that these emotional forces could have on actual behaviors.

**Kurt Nelson** 29:44

He formalized this thought with an important question, Would you be okay with your daughter or son marrying somebody from the other side of the political aisle? The question reveals how we feel about them, but it also shows what we think they feel about us.

**Eugen Dimant** 29:58

That is an. Important marker of society, because in many ways, this predicts a willingness to engage with others. But at the same time, affective polarization is still just a proxy for how actual interaction might play out, right? And so the bread and butter of economists especially is really not just like thinking about preferences, but also looking at the revealed side of the preference, and trying to measure behavior. And really try to see if it comes to a context in which I have to put, you know, trust on the line, and which I have trust others with my money, in which I have to trust others that they will be helping me, with me when I need help, in a context in which we need to cooperate with each other, that's when behavioral polarization comes in.

**Kurt Nelson** 30:46

And then Eugen pointed out the importance of understanding the gap between what we say and what we do, or how we feel about something, and what our actual behaviors are. It's like two sides of the same coin, but they're still different.

**Eugen Dimant** 31:00

Right, and so that's what I believe. Why it's so important to capture both sides of this equation, because we can find all these solutions to improving our feelings towards each other, but it doesn't mean that we actually will make people be nicer towards each other.

**Tim Houlihan** 31:15

We also asked Eugen what he thought was the greatest contributor to polarization in today's world, the era of social media.

**Eugen Dimant** 31:23

So the challenge that we all face these days is it becomes increasingly more difficult to discern which information to trust and which not. And because this is such an easy such a such a context in which information spreads so easily, it also exacerbates polarization in context where it shouldn't actually exist, where we actually have aligned opinions on certain topics, but it just creates echo chambers and hostilities. Because it focuses us so much on us versus them. And I think for us as a society to reduce the detrimental impact of polarization on us, on our sort of groups and identity and everything, we need to come to understand that **a lot of what we see is not necessarily a fair representation or a true representation of what the reality is**.

**Tim Houlihan** 32:16

And that sounds a bit like a downer. The behaviors are difficult to change, but it's not the whole story.

**Kurt Nelson** 32:24

With all of those challenges, Eugen still believes in good outcomes. There is still hope, at least for after the election.

**Eugen Dimant** 32:34

My hope is that after, you know, after the election, maybe we can sort of take a step back and let things cool. But I think at least for the next, you know, the foreseeable future, if anything, these hostilities will rise.

**Kurt Nelson** 32:49

Okay, so what Eugen was talking about is that polarization has a number of comorbidities. There are consequences to polarization that include where we're willing to move to and who we're willing to help if we're in distress. It influences this entire fabric of society and who we're going to cooperate with, which leads to a lot of other issues.

**Tim Houlihan** 33:15

Yeah, it's, this idea that polarization ends up being more of a loop than a catalyst or just a result. That polarization actually generates distrust, but generate but then distrust also generates polarization.

**Kurt Nelson** 33:34

It's a self-fulfilling element where the idea that the other, my belief that the other side isn't going to reciprocate if I do something nice to them, means that I'm less likely to do something nice for them. Which means they then view me as not being a nice person, and therefore they're less likely to do something nice for me. It's this very negative loop that we get stuck in.

**Tim Houlihan** 33:57

Right and I'm glad that Eugen believes that there is hope, even only after the election cycle.

**Kurt Nelson** 34:11

Okay, so, Tim, we're getting a better view of how complex polarization is and how many different things contribute to it. It's sort of like a quilt with a lot of different panels on it, but they're all tied together to bind the patchwork into a single topic.

**Tim Houlihan** 34:27

Yeah, it is a complex thing. And I'm glad that we're seeing a variety of research approaches here. Now let's turn to Andrea Robert. She's a professor of economics at Middlebury College in the town of Middlebury, Vermont. She teaches game theory and experimental economics, and we started our conversation with her about why she was studying polarization.

**Kurt Nelson** 34:49

She said it aligns with her constellation of interests in topics such as cooperation, social identity, voting models, self-deception and motivated reasoning. Which led us to ask, what does polarization mean to Andrea?

**Andrea Robbett** 35:04

A lot of the work that I've done is either on affective polarization, so this sort of generalized dislike and distrust that we've been seeing just between rank and file Democrats and Republicans over the years that is clearly bleeding into behavior just in everyday interactions outside of the political realm. So, just the way that we treat each other in the day to day interactions that we have with our friends and family, people in the grocery store and so on. So, we not only see this polarization in terms of how people feel about the different parties, and that's grown apart over time. But we also see a gap where people disagree, not just on policy opinions, but on basic, easily verifiable facts.

**Kurt Nelson**

So how are they related?

**Andrea Robbett**

Well, we know people are more generous toward their co-partisans than opposing partisans. We see this big difference in the way they treat different people. Why is that? Is this because they simply like co-partisans more, and so they want to get better outcomes for those people, they're more intrinsically motivated to help them out when they have the opportunity? Or is there something that is related to adhering to a certain norm of when I'm matched with a co-partisan, then I should be cooperative and an opposing partisan, I should not be as cooperative. So, do people believe vote for what they believe is truly best or to or correct? Or do they assume, well, my vote is very unlikely to make a difference, unlikely to be pivotal. So I vote primarily to express myself or to affirm my partisan identity,

**Kurt Nelson** 36:46

And we wanted to better understand the economist's take on this, so Andrea set up studies to see how much people would pay to access reliable, objective information that might alter their perspectives. It wasn't a surprise that people are unlikely to pay for information that doesn't confirm their previously held beliefs.

**Andrea Robbett** 37:07

But what was maybe more surprising and gave me more optimism was when we eliminated the costs of looking at the information, you could imagine we would still see this kind of free-riding effect if people have preferences over their beliefs and they don't want to find something that's going to that's going to cause them to have to update them. But we saw actually, most people look at it, and most people get the answer right, and this gap between individuals and voters kind of disappears.

**Tim Houlihan**

Oh, regardless of partisanship?

**Andrea Robbett**

Regardless of partisanship. And we've seen that in in other experiments on social learning. So for instance, if people can consult their peers about the answer, and they don't have any alternative objective source to look at, most people will consult their co-partisans, or to a lesser extent, opposing partisans, if that's their only option. Then they'll follow what they have to say. Having access to that social information doesn't make people's answers any more accurate, it only makes people's answers more partisan. But if they have access to another reliable source, most people will kind of ignore the social information in our experiment, and they'll look at that. And we see that this goes some way to correcting these misperceptions.

**Tim Houlihan**

So facts matter.

**Andrea Robbett**

Facts matter if you know that there's this objective single information source out there that you can consult.

**Tim Houlihan** 38:37

So, any observations that you have about polarization in the work that you've been doing?

**Andrea Robbett** 38:42

You know, there's, there's a lot of calls for optimism. I think there's been some, some interventions where, you know, we see that a big difference can be made with kind of pretty minor interactions.

**Tim Houlihan** 38:56

Well, here again, we see how economists study this topic by using money and having to pay for certain things they like or things they don't like, to help reveal deep seated beliefs and preferences. It highlights how irrational our behaviors can be.

**Kurt Nelson** 39:11

Yeah, this, this idea, there's a say-do gap that we've talked about before, this idea that, Oh, I might be willing to say I'm I would do this because obviously that's in my best self-interest. But when we actually get down to it, when we actually test it with real world money or other factors, well, maybe more of our true colors actually shine through.

**Tim Houlihan** 39:33

And right. And that's it? Right? That that this ends up these studies being become a very valuable way to gain insights into our behaviors, rather than simply gathering opinions and preferences. Kurt, yeah,

**Kurt Nelson** 39:44

And I did love this idea that that Andre brought up, and I love that she talked about it in this way, this *constellation of interest*. What a wonderful way of saying this idea that brings all of these different factors to. Other this, all of these different elements within behavioral science around, you know, cooperation and motivated reasoning and cooperation, all of those elements, you know, bring a new perspective on polarization, and if we're using our votes to signal which tribe we belong to, the social cues only increase that polarization.

**Tim Houlihan** 40:25

Yeah, and we can correct misperceptions if we can show that other non-social media rants of factual and reliable sources of data can be meaningful. Like, there is there, there is hope in that so I'm glad to take that away.

**Kurt Nelson** 40:42

Yeah, I think we just have to give it away for free, because people won't pay for it, right?

**Tim Houlihan** 40:59

That's right. So what we take away from the speakers is that polarization has a couple of key aspects about the consequences of polarization.

**Kurt Nelson** 41:06

We see that where you live matters. We also see how your loyalty to a certain team can influence acting in your best self-interest, how seeing the other side as being inconsiderate or mean works against us, because it's not entirely true. And how these misconceptions are difficult to clear up.

**Tim Houlihan** 41:25

Yeah, we are getting a vivid picture of how complex polarization really is, and how serious the consequences can be. Not just because we've got a bunch of scholars working on their own definitions, but because the ideas behind polarization need to be sussed out clearly in order to come up with really effective ways of combating it.

**Kurt Nelson** 41:47

But what about the robber's cave experiment that we heard about at the very beginning of this episode? Did it end in mayhem? Would the Eagles and Rattlers always view each other with suspicion and distrust? Were they doomed to be polarized forever? Tim. Tim, what happened?

**Tim Houlihan** 42:05

Sounds like a master cliffhanger going on here.

**Kurt Nelson** 42:09

I want to know. I'm curious.

**Tim Houlihan** 42:13

Okay, fortunately, the Robbers Cave experiment did not end with the boys at each other's throats, After four days of competition, Sherif moved the boys to the third and final stage of the experiment: the Integration Stage. In this phase, the researchers introduced exercises where the two teams had to cooperate with each other. They were given tasks that one team alone couldn't complete, so they had to work together, all of them to achieve that goal.

**Kurt Nelson** 42:39

It's worth noting that **more contact and more communication were in and of themselves, not enough to reduce the conflict.** It was having superordinate goals, for instance, ensuring that they had clean water, which were the real drivers of reducing intergroup conflict. This helped create a common identity as campers, which overshadowed their polarization identities as either Eagles or Rattlers.

**Tim Houlihan** 43:07

And just as a tasty little tidbit, the camp was located near a hideout of the notorious 19th century outlaw Jesse James. The hideout was referred to as the Robber's Cave. So the study became known as the Robbers Cave experiment. So we share Robbers Cave experiment for a few reasons. First, we need to acknowledge that there's it's a very natural thing for people to take sides and to develop identities associated with one group or another.

**Kurt Nelson** 43:35

Yeah. And secondly, the robber's cave campers ended their journey on a positive note, because they had to work together to solve issues that were beyond the ability of any one group to do so by itself. And it worked. It reminds Tim and me of how humans have not survived all of these millennia by only competing with each other. Sure, competition can bring out great things in each of us, but the greatest story in human history, the greatest story, the one that helped us survive, is that of cooperation.

**Tim Houlihan** 44:10

The Robber's Cave experiment shows us that we can overcome our polarized views of others. In our last episode, we're going to explore how we can overcome polarization in today's world, not just in camp for 11- and 12-year-old boys.

**Kurt Nelson** 44:24

Yes, we will hear from the organizers of the conference and hear their thoughts on what makes polarization so troublesome for our world today and what they are doing about it. The insights that you hear should give you hope.

**Tim Houlihan** 44:37

We'll hear from researchers from Stanford, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania.

**Kurt Nelson** 44:43

We hope you'll check out the next episode for this discussion of polarization solutions and some optimism.

**Tim Houlihan** 44:50

And we want to remind you, however you feel about politics, the only way your voice is going to get into the mix is by voting. So if you're not registered to vote, please do so, and if you are, make sure you vote.