

RESEARCHNOTE

The Effects of Exposure to Polarized Political Views Online On Generalized Trust

Abstract

Existing scholarship has studied social media as a cause of increased polarization, but does polarization on social media cause further social ills? More specifically, does exposure to polarized political views online affect people's perceptions of polarization offline, and does this reduce generalized trust? To answer these questions, I conducted a survey experiment with around 2000 US respondents where I presented them with a set of Facebook comments of varying degrees (high and low) and types (issue and affective) of polarization. My results show that exposure to high polarization comments, relative to low polarization comments, increases perceptions of polarization online and offline, but has small or statistically insignificant effects on generalized trust.

Keywords: polarization; social media; generalized trust; american politics

1. Introduction

Political science research on polarization and social media has primarily focused on social media as a cause of increased polarization. This study examines polarization on social media as a cause of further social ills. More precisely, this study examines whether exposure to polarized political views on social media reduces generalized trust.

Generalized trust is an essential part of social capital, and refers to how much we are willing to "ascribe benign intentions to others" (Keele 2007, 200; Putnam 2020 [2000]). High levels of trust are associated with all manner of desirable outcomes such as economic growth, low corruption, health, and happiness (Nahmias et al. 2022; Nannestad 2008; Putnam 2020 [2000]). Unfortunately for the US, generalized trust has been on the decline for the past half-century (Putnam 2020 [2000]).

Could social media be a threat to generalized trust? Once optimistically touted as a "Global Community" (Zuckerberg 2017) and a force for societal good, it is now seen as a quagmire of divisive

political discourse. Do such polarized political discussions on social media lead people to believe that polarization is worse than it actually is, and could these (incorrect) beliefs impact how much we trust each other?

To answer these questions, I fielded a survey experiment of around 2000 US respondents where I presented them with a set of Facebook comments of varying degrees (high and low) and types (issue and affective) of polarization, then asked them about their levels of generalized trust. This builds on two previous studies: Sabatini and Sarracino (2019), who found that use of social media led to a decrease in users' generalized trust, and Lee (2022), who found that increased levels of perceived polarization led to decreased generalized trust. While the former study was able to identify a causal and negative relationship between the use of social media and generalized trust, they were unable to say anything more definitive about what exactly their respondents were doing on social media that led to a decline in their levels of generalized trust. The latter study thus offers a potential mechanism – the more polarized one perceives society to be, the lower their levels of generalized trust (Lee 2022). I theorize that people's perceptions of polarization could be distorted by the highly polarized views expressed on social media.

My results show that not only did the respondents who saw the highly polarized Facebook comments (in particular, the affectively polarized comments) report that polarization online was higher than those who saw the low polarization comments, they thought that polarization 'in real life' was higher too. However, the difference in the level of generalized trust between the high and low polarization groups was either null or very small. Furthermore, respondents shown the highly polarized Facebook comments also reported a decreased interest in politics. Nonetheless, those concerned about generalized trust perhaps need not worry too much about increases in perceived polarization.

This study makes three contributions to the literature. First, from an empirical standpoint, it broadens our understanding of the socio-political consequences of social media. Secondly, from a methodological standpoint, it is one of the few studies that looks at polarization as a *cause* rather than a *consequence*. Finally, from a policy perspective, I hope this study contributes to the lively regulatory debate over social media algorithms that leverage divisive political content to keep their users hooked.

2. Generalized Trust

Generalized trust refers to how trustworthy you think other people – anonymous strangers in society who you do not know much about – are, based on your judgement of their character, what they think, and how they behave (Freitag and Traunmüller 2009, Putnam 2020 [2000]). Having high generalized trust means you believe that "most people have good intentions" (Lee 2022, 1536), their interests encapsulate your own, and that they will behave prosocially or at least decently by adhering to shared societal norms (Dinesen and Sønderskov 2012; Nannestad 2008). Hence, a society that lacks a foundation of shared values may find that it lacks generalized trust as well (Lee 2022; Rapp 2016).

Generalized trust is important because life in high-trust societies is better than in low-trust societies on many counts. High generalized trust has been linked to economic growth, political and civic participation, low corruption, prosocial behavior, and higher contributions to public good provision (Nahmias et al. 2022; Nannestad 2008; Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016). In economic interactions, it reduces transaction costs such as monitoring costs in principal-agent situations (Knack and Keefer 1997; Nannestad 2008), and it encourages civic participation such as volunteering and donating to charity (Nannestad 2008).

3. Polarization on Social Media

Social media is a significant source of news for many. As of 2024, just over half (54 per cent) of US adults say they get their news from social media at least sometimes, and a third (33 per cent) say they regularly get their news from Facebook (St. Aubin and Liedke 2024). In contrast to traditional news media which publishes the political views of a limited number of authors, social media allows anyone to broadcast their political views – and this exposes individuals to the political views of other ordinary people at an unprecedented scale too.

However, political views on social media are far more polarized than in reality, since strong partisans are more likely to share their views than moderates (Kiley 2017). People who have a high tendency for status-seeking and risk-taking are mostly to blame for hostile political discussions online (Bor and Petersen 2021), and individuals who 'crave chaos' are more motivated to share hostile political rumors than those who do not (Petersen, Osmundsen, and Arceneaux 2023). While only an unrepresentative 11 per cent of US users report having posted political content on Facebook, 52

per cent say that they see political content on Facebook (McClain, Anderson, and Gelles-Watnick 2024). Thus, much political discourse online is inaccurate and illogical, puts opinion over fact, and is mostly about criticizing one's opponents (Suhay, Bello-Pardo, and Maurer 2018). As such, social media users may extrapolate to form inaccurate judgements about how polarized society at large is. People erroneously ascribe their political rivals extreme beliefs, (Westfall et al. 2015), and they think polarization is twice as bad as it actually is (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016).

Such high levels of perceived polarization could erode generalized trust due to homophily – people do not form social connections readily with those different from themselves (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). A divided society where groups compete over resources or status is thus incompatible with robust levels of generalized trust (Dinesen and Sønderskov 2012).

Hence, political polarization could be one potent source of societal division. Firstly, as people increasingly take on partisanship as core parts of their identities, perhaps due to sorting (Fiorina and Abrams 2008), social identity theory predicts that this would trigger negative out-group bias (Tajfel and Turner 1979). This undermines a key belief necessary for generalized trust: that others' interests 'encapsulate' our own. That is, our political opponents cannot be trusted to be considerate of our interests and needs. Secondly, political divisions often concern moral issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and euthanasia (Rapp 2016). People's stances on these issues stem from deep moral beliefs, and so one may feel that a deeply politically divided society is also a deeply morally divided society, and this undercuts the sense of shared societal norms and values upon which generalized trust is built (Rapp 2016).

Hence, polarization on social media could be a threat to generalized trust. Given how crude political discourse on social media is, users could get the wrong impression about others in their society from social media, since they are exposed to the views of ordinary folk and not just political or traditional media elites. Partisans may come to the conclusion that their political opponents are more extreme and unreasonable than in reality, passing harsh judgement on their character and the moral beliefs (or lack thereof) that underpin their political views – which has the secondary consequence of making their own views even more extreme (Bail et al. 2018). Moderates may disengage when faced with liberals and conservatives battling it out in the comments section. All in all, this heightened division and competition could degrade people's sense of common belonging and shared values, thereby eroding generalized trust (Lee 2022).

4. Data and Methods

To test my hypotheses, I fielded a survey experiment with around 2000 representative¹ US respondents on the Prolific platform in June 2025.

One key aim of the study is to test the relationship between perceived polarization and generalized trust in a more 'natural' setting. As mentioned above, this study builds on the work of Lee (2022), whose experimental manipulations were constructed news articles emphasizing to one group of respondents that 'America Is More Divided Than Ever' and that 'America Is Not So Divided After All' to another, essentially telling respondents directly that society was polarized or not (so) polarized. In contrast, I presented respondents with a real Facebook post and its accompanying comments section based on real Facebook comments.

Furthermore, I am interested in the effects of exposure to non-elite polarization. Thus, my experimental manipulation varies the type and degree of polarization in comments made by non-elites across treatment groups. While this 'realistic'-looking treatment adds contextual detail that could dampen treatment effect size (Brutger et al. 2023), I prioritize mimicking how people could 'naturally' come across polarized views online as closely as possible.

All sets of comments were displayed below the same Facebook news post which read: "The House's version of Trump's budget bill advanced through a key hurdle before a chamber-wide vote" (Fox News 2025). The post is from Fox News, but to avoid distracting respondents with the provenance, I covered up mentions of Fox News with a generic-looking fictitious news website called 'News Today'. The topic of Trump's budget bill was selected for the existence of a range of opinions for and against the bill. Pretests with more controversial topics such as abortion proved too vulnerable to a 'pre-treatment effect' (Kane 2024) where respondents zeroed in on the news topic and barely registered the comments section. Despite the treatment's Facebook-like appearance, the study is not about Facebook or news per se – I would expect some degree of generalizability to similar settings like comments sections of news websites or on online consultative platforms.

4.1 Treatment Conditions

The experimental intervention is the comments section displayed below the aforementioned Facebook post. Each comments section is twelve comments long and exhibits different degrees and types of

1. The sample is balanced by age, gender, and ethnicity according to the 2015 US census (Prolific 2023), but in order to ensure familiarity with the Facebook platform, I subsequently screened out non-Facebook users.

polarization designed to manipulate respondents' levels of perceived polarization through the political views of ordinary netizens. (Treatment images in Supplementary Material.)

There are three treatment groups: high affective polarization, high issue polarization, and low polarization.

Table 1. Number of comments by type and treatment group

Comment type / treatment group	Affective against	Issue against	Neutral	Issue for	Affective for
Affective polarisation	5	0	2	0	5
Issue polarisation	0	5	2	5	0
Low polarisation	1	1	8	1	1

The main comparison is between the effects of exposure to high versus low polarization. I operationalize the difference between high and low polarization by varying the proportion for and against a political topic (Trump's budget bill). I ensure that there are at least some partisan and neutral comments across the board to make the comments sections appear more 'natural'.

The high polarization conditions contain five comments for, five comments against, and two comments that are neutral about the bill. This is akin to a highly polarized comments section of a hot-button political news item posted by a big news outlet on Facebook. However, a distinction ought to be made between high affective polarization and high political/issue polarization (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), so I create two different high polarization treatments:

4.1.1 High Issue Polarization Condition

Political polarization (more specifically, issue polarization, to avoid confusion) refers to either the process or the state of the collapse of the middle ground as people pull away towards the opposite ends of a spectrum of political viewpoints (Mason 2013). Hence, the high issue polarization treatment demonstrates policy disagreement and is made of comments giving reasons to support or oppose the bill. Example comments include "Medicaid needs to be cut to include only the truly needy. Not be an alternative to finding work", and "They are adding \$5 trillion more to the National Debt. Completely unsustainable."

4.1.2 High Affective Polarization Condition

In contrast, affective polarization is not about policy disagreement, and instead concerns how the two opposing camps increasingly dislike and distrust each other (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012).

Hence, the comments in the high affective polarization treatment are light on policy positions and express an aversion towards political opponents (Campos and Federico 2025), e.g. "House republicans would walk off a cliff if their king told them to do so". Affective polarization can threaten democratic function because it impedes cooperation across party lines (Groenendyk and Banks 2014) and government effectiveness (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). Worse still, if left unchecked, it can morph into a pernicious and mutually distrustful 'Us' vs 'Them' polarization, ripe for exploitation by political entrepreneurs willing to capitalize on grievances and demonize opponents for their own political gain (McCoy and Somer 2019).

4.1.3 Low Polarization Condition

Finally, the low polarization treatment has one affective comment against, one issue comment against, eight neutral comments, one issue comment for, and one affective comment for the bill. Like the high polarization conditions, there is an equal proportion of comments for and against the bill. The neutral category consists of comments such as "Where can we see what is in this bill in plain language?"

4.1.4 No Comments Condition

While not a 'control' condition, I also include a version of the treatment with no comments, i.e., just the Facebook post. This provides baseline measures only for diagnostic reasons – a treatment condition without comments is not directly comparable to the treatment conditions with comments. (Further explanation in the Appendices.)

4.1.5 Construction of the Treatment Images

The comments sections reflect real comments made on Facebook. To construct the comments sections, I first scraped and read through thousands of comments on political Facebook posts from major news sites such as ABC news, AP, Fox News, USA Today, and WSJ to familiarize myself with the typical comments on their posts. I then selected a subset that typified political Facebook comments that expressed dislike or distrust of the 'other' side (affective), expressed a reason why the commenter supported or opposed the bill (issue), or said something neutral. I then drew from this pool of comments to construct the treatment comments sections according to the proportions detailed above (see Table 1). Finally, I edited the comments lightly for length and typos and put them together in an image of a Facebook post and comments section with the commenters' profile

pictures and names pixelated to avoid the confounding effects of identity cues, and presented the comments to respondents in a randomized order. I then asked respondents about their levels of perceived polarization and generalized trust.

5. Results

After filtering out respondents who did not consent to the survey, did not have Facebook accounts, timed out or exited the survey halfway, or failed the attention check, I was left with 1550 responses (2067 including the no comments 'control' condition). The results shown below are expressed in terms of standard deviations to enable ease of comparison between response variables of different scales.

5.1 Effects on Perceived Polarization

Table 2. Manipulation check: Perceived Polarization

	Dependent variable: Perceived Polarisation				
	Comments	Online	General	Disagree	Dislike
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Affective	0.780*** (0.058)	0.191*** (0.062)	0.284*** (0.062)	0.189*** (0.062)	0.096* (0.062)
Issue	0.125** (0.058)	−0.034 (0.062)	0.042 (0.062)	0.052 (0.062)	−0.055 (0.062)
Constant	−0.301*** (0.041)	−0.052 (0.044)	−0.108** (0.044)	−0.080* (0.044)	−0.014 (0.044)
Observations	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550
Adjusted R ²	0.116	0.009	0.014	0.005	0.003

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Significance cutoffs are for single-tailed tests as pre-registered (see Appendices). Reference category: low polarization. Outcome variables are standardized. Full question wording in the Appendices.

Before I present the main results on generalized trust, I first show that the treatments successfully shifted respondents' levels of perceived polarization, not only of the comments sections themselves, but also more broadly online and in the real world.

First, respondents rated the **comments** in the high polarization conditions as more polarized than the low polarization condition. Respondents in the affective polarization condition rated their comments section as 0.780 of a standard deviation more polarized than the respondents in the low polarization condition, which was statistically significant at the 1 per cent level. Respondents in the

issue polarization condition also rated their comments section as more polarized than those in the low polarization condition, but the estimate was smaller at 0.125 of a standard deviation, and only significant at the 5 per cent level.

Second, respondents in the affective polarization condition rated people **online** as 0.191 of a standard deviation more polarized than respondents in the low polarization condition (significant to the 1 per cent level) while the coefficient for the issue polarization group was not statistically significant.

Third, this heightened perception of polarization of their comments section and people online generalized – to a smaller degree – to people ‘in real life’, but only for those in the affective polarization condition. These respondents perceived Americans to be more politically divided in **general** and that there was more **disagreement** between the policies that liberals and conservatives want (0.284 and 0.189 of a standard deviation respectively, significant to the 1 per cent level.) They also perceived increased **dislike** and distrust amongst liberals and conservatives (0.096 of a standard deviation), but this was significant only at the 10 per cent level. The issue polarization treatment did not have a statistically significant on these measures.

These results imply a few things. First, it is exposure to affective polarization rather than issue polarization that worsens perceived polarization. This provides some reassurance that disagreements over political issues – if done in a way that does not attack or insult one’s political opponents – does not threaten existing perceptions of political unity in society. Second, while the higher levels of perceived polarization of the affectively polarized comments section translated into higher perceptions of polarization more generally online and ‘in real life’, the effect sizes were, in absolute terms, quite small. This suggests that people do not entirely extrapolate what they see online into real life. However, it is possible that these small effects add up over time, and repeated exposure to polarized views could substantially increase users’ levels of perceived polarization.

5.2 Effects on Generalized Trust

Overall, the effects of the treatments on generalized trust were small and did not clear the bar for statistical significance. Neither the affective nor issue polarization treatment had a statistically significant effect on the Trust 1 variable. The issue polarization treatment also did not have a statistically significant effect on Trust 2, but the affective polarization treatment reduced Trust 2 by

Table 3. Main Effects: Generalized Trust

	Generalised Trust	
	Trust 1	Trust 2
	(1)	(2)
Affective	0.044 (0.062)	−0.105** (0.062)
Issue	0.027 (0.062)	0.008 (0.062)
Constant	−0.024 (0.044)	0.032 (0.044)
Observations	1,550	1,550
Adjusted R ²	−0.001	0.001

p<0.1; **p<.05; *p<0.01. Significance cutoffs are for single-tailed tests as pre-registered (see Appendices). Reference category: low polarization. Variable construction: Trust 1 - "Generally speaking, how often can you trust other people?" (American National Election Studies 2021), Trust 2 - an additive index measuring trust as encapsulated interest (Nannestad 2008), i.e adherence to civic values, following Lee (2022) (see Supplementary Materials). Outcome variables are standardized.*

0.105 of a standard deviation (only significant to the 5 per cent level). In comparison, the effect size of the affective treatment on general perceived polarization was more than double that at 0.284 of a standard deviation. It is possible that the civic behaviors measure of trust offers something more fine-grained and concrete than the classic ANES trust measure.

Taken at face value, this could be somewhat encouraging news. Even for the affective polarization conditions where respondents did indeed perceive higher levels of polarization in real life, this barely seemed to affect their trust in one another.

5.3 Secondary Analyses

5.3.1 External Efficacy

Other than perceived polarization and trust, I also probed respondents’ feelings of external efficacy. Using ANES data, Enders and Armaly (2019) find that increased perceived polarization reduces an individual’s sense of external political efficacy (how much an individual thinks they are able to influence politics). However, my study found that neither high polarization treatments had a statistically significant effect on external efficacy.

5.3.2 *Interest in Politics*

I also investigated respondents' interest in politics, since conflict and negativity in polarizing comments could make people disengage from politics. Indeed, exposure to the affective and issue polarization conditions reduced interest in politics by 0.137 and 0.118 of a standard deviation respectively (significant only at the 5 per cent level).

5.3.3 *Political Extremity*

I also found that respondents' levels of political extremity did not moderate the relationship between the treatments and perceived polarization.

5.3.4 *Ceiling Effects*

Lastly, the effect of the treatments on perceived polarization could have been dampened by a ceiling effect. On a scale of 1 (American society is not divided at all) to 7 (American society is highly divided), the average response of the no-comments condition was 5.42, while for the high affective polarization condition, it was 5.84.

The tables and graphs for this section can be found in the Appendices.

6. Discussion

In conclusion, this study shows that exposure to polarized views online worsens perceptions of polarization both online and offline. This is the case for affectively polarized comments but not ideologically polarized comments, which perhaps offers some good news – it is safe to carry on with civilized disagreements over policy because it does not make people think society is politically divided, but slinging proverbial mud at one's political opponents online understandably bodes ill for perceptions of polarization. In what might be further good news, this study offers some evidence that exposure to polarized views online does not affect generalized trust.

However, one limitation of this study is an extremely common one: using a one-shot survey experiment to study a long-term phenomenon – in this case, repeated exposure to polarized views on social media over a long period of time. A month-long study such as Bail's (2021) (testing the effect of exposure to out-partisan opinions on polarization) may more fully capture the effects of such long-term phenomena, particularly on generalized trust, which is a "sticky" concept (Nannestad 2008, 421).

Nevertheless, this study adds to a growing body of literature demonstrating that people's online lives affect their political attitudes (Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017; Sabatini and Sarracino 2019) and even behavior (Schaub and Morisi 2020) in real life. This is a cause of concern not only because the distorted picture of reality on social media skews people's views of the real world, but also because social media's architecture can be damaging – social media algorithms have been found to prioritize engaging content irrespective of the harms they cause (BBC News 2021). My results also offer a note of caution to online deliberative democracy initiatives, especially those in the form of online comments forums such as Talk London (City Hall 2012).

In this study, I show that being exposed to polarized social media comments causes people to believe that society is generally more polarized both online and in real life. While I also found that increased perceptions of polarization had little to no effect on generalized trust, it would be premature to breathe a sigh of relief – polarization begets polarization, and with it, other potential socio-political ills (Enders and Armaly 2019). As such, there remain plenty of avenues for research on what social media's transformation of political life is doing to our societies.

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Appendix 1. Treatment Design

Appendix 1.1 Choosing a Single Topic

I chose to use one news topic across all the treatment groups. Adding another topic would have reduced the power of the study because I was not expecting large effect sizes and I would not have been able to increase the number of participants due to budgetary constraints. While repeating

the experiment with a different news article may result in different effect sizes, I would expect the direction of the effects (if any) to be the same.

Appendix 1.2 No Pure Control

The aim of the study is to compare how people respond to different levels of polarization. This means all the treatments must 'contain polarization' and thus comments – it is unclear 'how much polarization' there is if there are no viewpoints at all. Having a no-comments 'pure control' treatment group would mean delivering a compound treatment that is not comparable to the other treatment groups. The only difference between the three 'with comments' groups is the type of polarization in the comments, but adding the no-comments condition to the mix also adds a difference in the content and context respondents are shown. However, adding in the no-comments condition offers helpful baseline estimates of the outcome variables, which I use for diagnostic purposes, and I do not include the results of the no-comments condition in the main analyses.

Appendix 2. Descriptive Statistics

While the order I put in with Prolific was for 2500 responses, because I requested that the panel be representative by age, ethnicity, and gender, the data collection stopped at the maximum sample size Prolific could supply while maintaining representativeness: 2421 responses.

After filtering out only the respondents who did not consent to the survey, who did not have Facebook accounts, and other respondents who timed out or exited the survey halfway, I am left with 2387 responses.

Table 4. Education Distribution

Education	Percentage
Some high school or less	0%
High school diploma or GED	9%
Some college, but no degree	13%
Associates or technical degree	10%
Bachelor's degree	39%
Graduate or professional degree (MA, MS, MBA, PhD, JD, MD, DDS etc.)	29%
Prefer not to say	0%

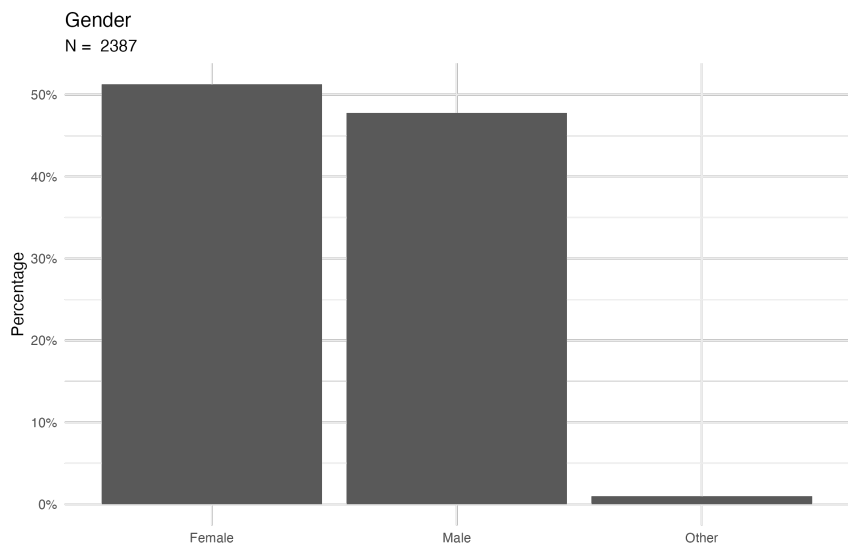


Figure 1. Gender Distribution

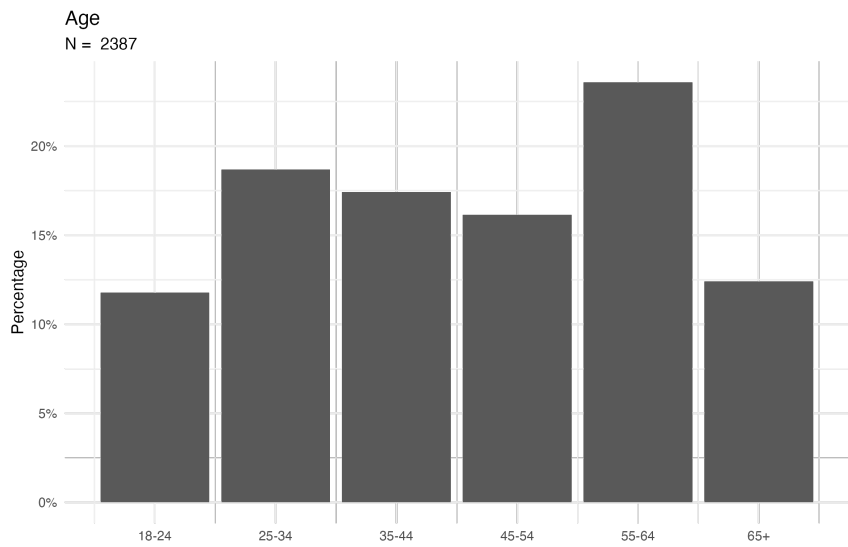


Figure 2. Age Distribution

Table 5. Attention check results by treatment group

Attention check result	Low	Affective	Control	Issue
Fail	14%	13%	13%	14%
Pass	86%	87%	87%	86%

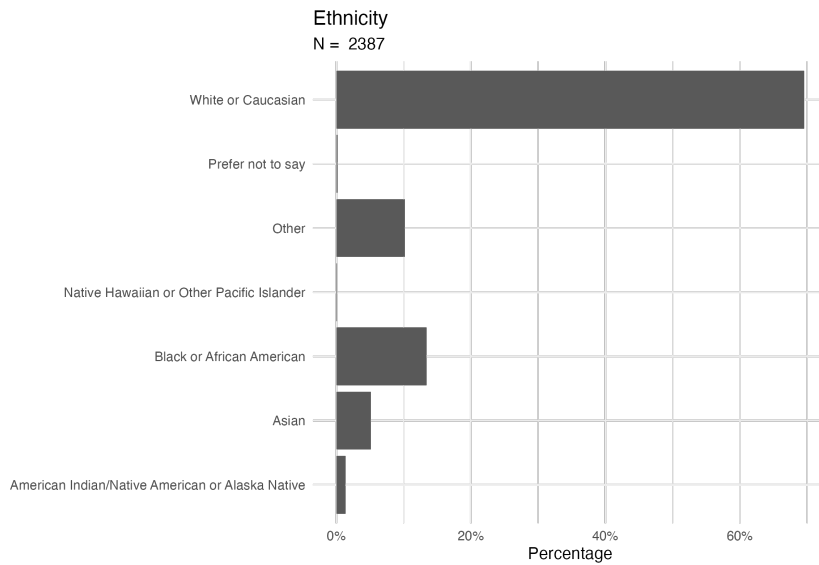


Figure 3. Ethnicity Distribution

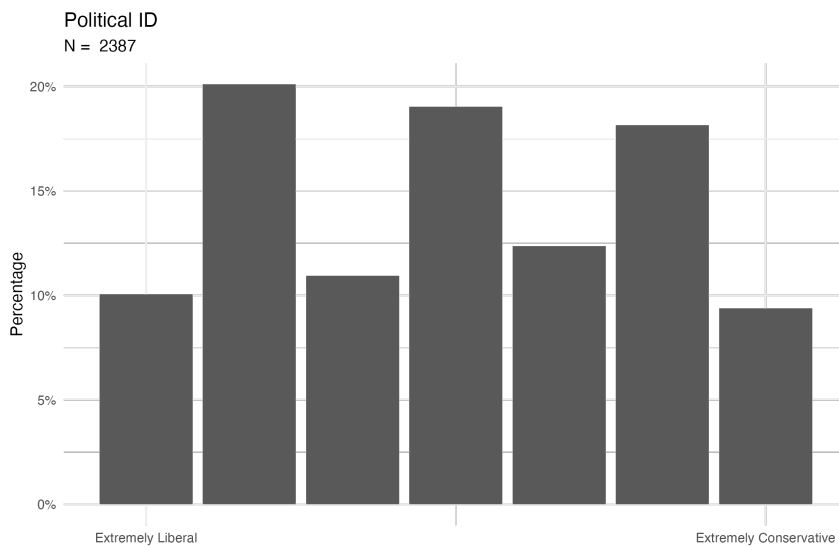


Figure 4. Political ID Distribution

Appendix 2.1 Attention check

The attention check read:

"When a big news story breaks, people often go online to get up-to-the-minute details on what is going on. We want to know which websites people trust to get this information. We also want to know if people are paying attention to the question. To show that you've read this much, please ignore the question and select ABC News and The Drudge Report as your two answers."

"When there is a big news story, which is the one news site you would visit first? (Please only choose one)"
[19 options to select from]

Respondents pass the attention check only if they correctly select two out of the 19 options presented to them. I filter out respondents who did not pass, leaving me with 2067 observations. The attention check pass rates were comparable across the treatment groups.

Appendix 3. Hypotheses

High generalized trust means you believe that the generalized 'other' in your society has 'encapsulated' your interests into their own, and this is underpinned by a sense of shared societal values. Societal divisions threaten generalized trust, and high perceived polarization is one such threat, given the crystallization of political attitudes into social identities and the often morally charged nature of political divisions.

Polarization on social media could be a threat to generalized trust. Political discourse on social media, while ostensibly produced by ordinary users (as opposed to political or media elites), is produced by an unrepresentative, highly politically engaged part of the population and is far more polarized than in real life. However, if users take such views as representative of society, their high perceived polarization could diminish their sense of generalized trust.

Polarization could be conceived of as affective (emotional and tribal) or issue (disagreements over policy issues). I do not have particularly strong expectations for whether respondents would be bothered by one type of polarization more than the other, but insofar as they are less bothered by arguably more healthy (issue) rather than unhealthy (affective) polarization, this may be good news

for the practice of deliberative democracy in online spaces.

H1a: Exposure to highly affectively polarized political views online increases perceived polarization

H1b: Exposure to highly affectively polarized political views online decreases generalized trust

H2a: Exposure to highly issue polarized political views online increases perceived polarization

H2b: Exposure to highly issue polarized political views online decreases generalized trust

Appendix 4. Secondary Analyses

Table 6. Secondary Analyses

	Generalised Trust							
	Trust 1				Trust 2			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Treat: Affective	0.047 (0.062)	0.056 (0.063)	0.055 (0.062)	0.050 (0.062)	−0.041 (0.059)	−0.004 (0.058)	−0.054 (0.060)	−0.073 (0.058)
Treat: Issue	0.026 (0.062)	0.029 (0.062)	0.030 (0.062)	0.023 (0.062)	−0.004 (0.059)	0.023 (0.058)	0.022 (0.060)	−0.011 (0.058)
PercPol: Online	−0.013 (0.022)				−0.285*** (0.020)			
PercPol: General		−0.034* (0.021)				−0.297*** (0.020)		
PercPol: Disagree			−0.040*** (0.017)				−0.185*** (0.017)	
PercPol: Dislike				−0.050*** (0.020)				−0.269*** (0.019)
Constant	0.054 (0.134)	0.164 (0.125)	0.182* (0.098)	0.255** (0.119)	1.701*** (0.127)	1.664*** (0.116)	0.971*** (0.095)	1.516*** (0.112)
Observations	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550
Adjusted R ²	−0.001	0.0001	0.002	0.002	0.112	0.127	0.074	0.116

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Significance cutoffs are for single-tailed tests as pre-registered (see Appendices).

Reference category: low polarization.

Coefficients are standardized. See Appendices for full question wording.

While not strictly speaking a mediation analysis, the results of these models suggest that perceived polarization could be the mechanism through which exposure to polarized views affects generalized trust – at least, when generalized trust is measured as the belief in the likelihood of one's fellow Americans engaging in civic or prosocial behavior (Trust 2). The effect sizes on the Trust 1 variables

increase slightly when controlling for the four types of perceived polarization (online, general, disagree, and dislike), and, in any case, none of them are significant to begin with. For Trust 2, the treatment effects for the affective polarization condition compared to the low polarization condition shrink when controlling for the four types of perceived polarization and become statistically insignificant.

Appendix 4.1 Secondary Outcomes

I report the results of the regression models testing the effect of the treatments on secondary outcomes below.

Table 7. Secondary Analyses

	Secondary Outcomes						
	Efficacy	Commonality	Interest	Angry	Exhausted	Hopeful	Excited
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Affective	0.022 (0.062)	−0.014 (0.062)	−0.137** (0.062)	−0.002 (0.062)	0.028 (0.062)	−0.082* (0.062)	−0.080 (0.062)
Issue	0.007 (0.062)	0.031 (0.062)	−0.118** (0.062)	0.002 (0.062)	−0.041 (0.062)	0.003 (0.062)	−0.071 (0.062)
Constant	−0.010 (0.044)	−0.006 (0.044)	0.085* (0.044)	−0.0001 (0.044)	0.004 (0.044)	0.026 (0.044)	0.050 (0.044)
Observations	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550
Adjusted R ²	−0.001	−0.001	0.002	−0.001	−0.001	0.0002	−0.00001

p<0.1; **p<0.05; *p<0.01. Significance cutoffs are for single-tailed tests as pre-registered (see Appendices).
Reference category: low polarization.
Coefficients are standardized. Full question wording can be found in the Appendices.*

As explained in the main paper, I hypothesized that exposure to highly polarized political views could reduce one’s sense of political efficacy. I also hypothesized that exposure to highly polarized political views could decrease an individual’s sense of shared commonality with others in their society, following Lee (2022). She theorized that what links increased perceptions of polarization to lower levels of generalized trust is a reduced feeling of having values in common with others in one’s society. I interpret this as referring to the encapsulated interest view of trust – that is, to trust someone means to believe that they are motivated to serve common interests. It goes without saying that this conception of trust requires there to be interests in common, and so to the extent that increased perceptions of polarization means an eroded sense of shared values in society, this measure could

capture the harm that increased perceived polarization can do to social cohesion.

Nevertheless, the treatments did not have a statistically significant effect on respondents' sense of commonality with others.

Lastly, I also hypothesized that being exposed to highly polarized political views would increase respondents' negative (anger, exhaustion) feelings towards politics and decrease their positive (hope, excitement) feelings towards politics, following the question wording from Pew (Pew Research Center 2023). Overall, exposure to the treatments had negligible effects on these outcomes.

Appendix 4.2 Covariates

Table 8. Manipulation check and main effects with controls

	Perceived Polarisation					Generalised Trust	
	Comments	Online	General	Disagree	Dislike	Trust 1	Trust 2
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Affective	0.775*** (0.058)	0.194*** (0.061)	0.286*** (0.061)	0.190*** (0.061)	0.101** (0.061)	0.043 (0.061)	−0.113** (0.061)
Issue	0.122** (0.058)	−0.029 (0.061)	0.049 (0.061)	0.063 (0.061)	−0.044 (0.061)	0.038 (0.062)	0.001 (0.061)
Age group	0.072*** (0.016)	0.078*** (0.016)	0.080*** (0.016)	0.103*** (0.016)	0.084*** (0.016)	0.092*** (0.016)	−0.028* (0.016)
Male	0.188*** (0.048)	0.122** (0.050)	0.074 (0.050)	0.025 (0.050)	0.051 (0.050)	−0.024 (0.051)	−0.036 (0.050)
Educ binary	0.028 (0.052)	−0.218*** (0.054)	−0.182*** (0.054)	−0.104* (0.055)	−0.284*** (0.054)	0.007 (0.055)	0.368*** (0.054)
Ethnicity binary	0.034 (0.052)	−0.010 (0.055)	−0.053 (0.055)	−0.058 (0.055)	−0.153*** (0.055)	0.133** (0.055)	0.187*** (0.055)
Constant	−0.795*** (0.123)	−0.301** (0.130)	−0.299** (0.130)	−0.400*** (0.130)	0.027 (0.130)	−0.670*** (0.131)	−0.386*** (0.130)
Observations	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550
Adjusted R ²	0.134	0.036	0.037	0.032	0.041	0.023	0.037

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Significance cutoffs for the Affective and Issue coefficients are for single-tailed tests as pre-registered, but double-tailed for the controls (see Appendices).

Reference category: low polarization.

Variable Construction: Age group - by decade, Male [0 - Female and other, 1 - Male], Education binary - [1 - Bachelor's or graduate professional degree, 0 - otherwise], Ethnicity binary - [0 - non-white, 1 - white]. Coefficients are standardized. Full question wording can be found in the Appendices.

The estimates for the manipulation checks and the main effects were robust to the addition of standard demographic controls.

Appendix 4.3 Moderation

Table 9. Moderation: Political Extremity

	Perceived Polarisation				Generalised Trust	
	Online	General	Disagree	Dislike	Trust 1	Trust 2
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Affective	0.206** (0.118)	0.355*** (0.118)	0.232** (0.119)	0.157* (0.119)	0.038 (0.119)	−0.082 (0.118)
Issue	−0.036 (0.121)	0.032 (0.121)	0.141 (0.121)	−0.047 (0.121)	0.024 (0.122)	0.243 (0.121)
Extremity	−0.004 (0.045)	0.067 (0.044)	0.053 (0.045)	0.061 (0.045)	0.030 (0.045)	0.149*** (0.045)
Affective * Extremity	−0.010 (0.063)	−0.040 (0.062)	−0.023 (0.063)	−0.034 (0.063)	0.007 (0.063)	−0.001 (0.062)
Issue * Extremity	0.001 (0.063)	0.008 (0.062)	−0.053 (0.063)	−0.003 (0.063)	0.003 (0.063)	−0.139** (0.063)
Constant	−0.046 (0.087)	−0.221** (0.087)	−0.169* (0.087)	−0.117 (0.087)	−0.074 (0.087)	−0.218** (0.087)
Observations	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550	1,550
Adjusted R ²	0.007	0.016	0.004	0.003	−0.002	0.014

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Significance cutoffs for Affective and Issue are for single-tailed tests as pre-registered, but double-tailed tests for Extremity, Affective * Extremity, Issue * Extremity, and the Constant.

Reference category: low polarization.

Variable Construction: Extremity (from Political ID) - "Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal (left) to extremely conservative (right). Where would you place yourself on this scale?" (responses on a 7-point scale folded in half, ranging from 0 - middle of the road, to 4 - extremely liberal of conservative). Coefficients are standardized. Full question wording can be found in the Appendices.

I investigate whether it is moderates or strong partisans that are primarily responsible for the relationship between exposure to polarized views and perceived polarization. It could be that partisans, who are typically the ones producing and engaging in such discussions, are more accustomed to such discord, and thus their levels of perceived polarization in society would be unaffected by witnessing political division (Enders and Armaly 2019) while moderates might be sensitive to such divisive opinions. Similarly, those with more extreme political attitudes are unlikely to have many beliefs or interests in common with moderates, and this lack of a sense of shared values could undermine the trust they have in the generalized other. Hence, moderates' sense of generalized trust may be more sensitive to exposure to polarization than strong partisans.

However, the results show that neither the relationship between exposure to polarized views and perceived polarization nor the relationship between exposure to polarized views and generalized

trust is moderated by respondents' political extremity. The exception is the relationship between the issue polarization treatment and the composite Trust 2 variable. Controlling for the other variables, a higher level of political extremity is associated with 0.149 of a standard deviation higher reported levels of generalized trust, which is significant to the 1 per cent level. However, taking everything else into account, it is likely that this is merely noise.

Appendix 5. Baseline Measures of Perceived Polarization

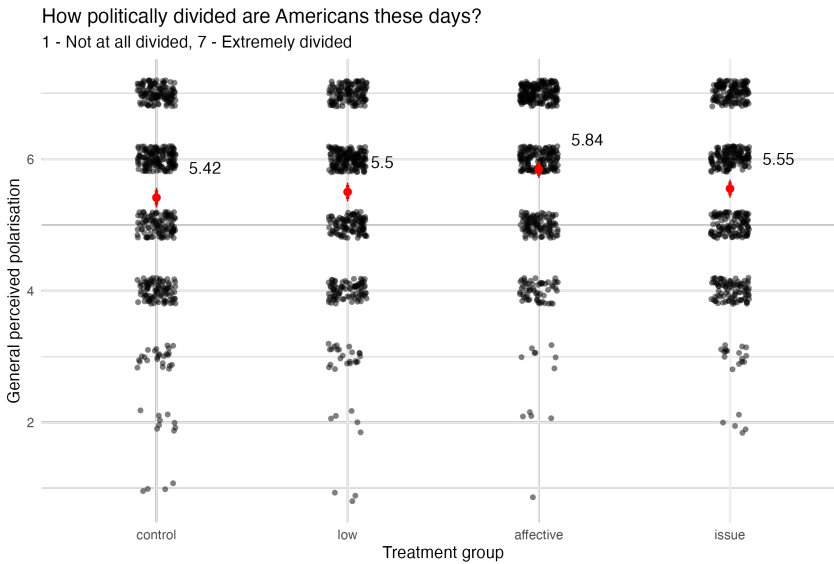


Figure 5. Perceived polarization by treatment group. Points jittered for clarity.

I present the distribution of perceived polarization by treatment group to assess whether the results could have been dampened by ceiling effects. Perceived polarization in the US is fairly high, and amongst my respondents, it hovered between 5.42 (the no-comments condition) to 5.84 (affective polarization condition) out of seven points. It was already high when Lee (2022) conducted her study, and it is possible that in 2025, there is limited mileage for studies that try to experimentally manipulate their respondents' levels of perceived polarization (any higher, at least), but further work could be done on what information people use to assess how polarized society is.