CHAPTER

6

Breaking the gridlock to enhance collective action

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Polarization divides societies into belligerent and opposing camps, poisoning domestic and international cooperation.

Moving away from zero-sum thinking by providing global public goods can ease polarization indirectly.

Addressing misperceptions about issues and other groups can bridge divides and reduce perceptions of insecurity and thus ease polarization directly.

Collective action that transcends group boundaries—not within groups, such as those defined by country borders, but across groups—is paramount for managing interdependence, including through the provision of global public goods.[1] Collective action is often particularly challenging when cooperation is required.[2]

This chapter considers how heightened political polarization within countries impedes cross-country cooperation to enhance the provision of global public goods.[3] It first delves into how narrow group identification can lead to political polarization, eroding space for acting together on shared challenges. It then shows how political polarization hinders the emergence of shared narratives, beliefs and goals, diminishing the prospects for collective action. Finally, it argues that polarization is surmountable and describes pathways for breaking the gridlock.

How does political polarization come about?

Collective action is influenced by social contexts—through shared beliefs, values, social norms, worldviews, narratives and how agents see themselves and others.[4] Shared identities enhance social ties that can produce many benefits for people's wellbeing and positive societal outcomes within groups.[5] Identifying with social groups is sometimes supported by affiliation with abstract notions, such as being part of a nation.[6] National parochialism—strong cooperation within countries—is ubiquitous.[7] But global public goods require transnational collective action that transcends country boundaries (chapter 3).[8]

Identifying with a larger global community would facilitate contributions to global public goods.[9] In every society many people are inclined to care about others beyond borders.[10] Interdependence is linked with people adopting a more cosmopolitan view of the world, shrinking their perceived social distance with geographically distant others.[11] For instance, as people get exposed to greater diversity, stereotypes diminish and lead people to perceive different social groups as more similar.[12] While it is sometimes assumed that cosmopolitan attitudes are held primarily by elites, they are common across the population.[13] Yet barriers to the emergence and consolidation of beliefs and attitudes supporting international cooperation are appearing as a result of within-country political polarization, which is particularly harmful when it takes the form of affective polarization, as people favour their group even more and other groups even less.

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To see how, note that collective action is influenced by the way people reason about societal issues—and the beliefs, narratives, attitudes and viewpoints that they bring into public reasoning. And since many of the most pressing challenges must address the priorities of various diverse groups at once, people must transcend group boundaries and fairly consider the needs and priorities of others. To enhance collective action among this diversity of priorities and beliefs, the human development approach emphasizes the centrality of public reasoning and deliberation (box 6.1).[14]

Strong group identification can work against intergroup cooperation, particularly when the adoption of norms and values of an ingroup is based on a strong sense of identity.[15] Group affiliation also has consequences for how people form and maintain beliefs. Ingroup favouritism (seeing one's own group in a positive light) has been described as one of a few fundamental beliefs that form the basis for a range of other behavioural and informational biases.[16] When people identify strongly with a particular group, they may be more receptive to information that aligns with the group's beliefs while rejecting information that contradicts them, thus engaging in identity-based reasoning.[17]

Some forms of identity-based affiliation with an ingroup can lead to affective political polarization—feeling positive about one's own group and negative about other groups.[18] Social identity can be a powerful driver of positive within-group cooperative behaviour.[19] But it can also hinder intergroup cooperation when it builds on the strong ties that people develop towards their social group and takes a form of polarization that instils a heightened dislike and hostility towards outgroups. Then it can be pernicious,[20] such as

Box 6.1 Public reasoning and deliberation for human development

Human development emphasizes people's values, beliefs and aspirations when determining the actions societies might take in shaping our shared future.[1] It also calls attention to processes of social choice and deliberation and to the crucial importance of public reasoning for advancing just outcomes. People's ability to engage in any process of collective action depends both on their individual agency and on the availability of practical avenues to influence policies and decisions.

Agency is in turn enhanced by broader processes of public deliberation, which enable people to gather information, exchange ideas, consider diverse perspectives and resolve disagreements. Public reasoning processes draw on the wide range of values and motivations. For example, people might have differing motives for supporting green policies—from improving conditions in their own neighbourhoods to wanting a better world for future generations. Drawing on different positions might help expand common ground and widen social support for green policies.[2] In addition to upholding a plurality of views and beliefs, public reasoning can ensure that collective decisions are seen as fair, by engaging a wide range of interests and being seen as justifiable in the eyes of others, including those who have differing views. It also allows for continually refining policies in the light of changing values, new information and societal evolution, thus ensuring that concerns of justice remain relevant.

The efficacy of procedures of social choice is thus greatly enhanced by social contexts that foster public reasoning, with an emphasis on agency and participation. Many of these characteristics of social choice procedures are in line with democratic norms and practices, such as pluralism and accountability. Trust plays a role here as well. In addition to facilitating the most basic activities in social life, generalized trust contributes to aspects of democratic political practice, such as tolerating differences. Generalized trust also contributes to the development of overlapping social networks and the forms of association where people can come together, participate in their communities and engage in civic life.[3] By contrast, trust only in those from one's own social group and known others signals a lower radius of trust, with a potentially diminished scope for cooperating with unknown others.[4]

For collective action, procedures of social choice allow people to be motivated by more than their own selfish interests (as discussed in chapter 4). Indeed, one the biggest challenges to collective action among diverse groups is overcoming people's partiality towards their own groups and any vested interests connected to those groups. The need to overcome this parochialism further underscores public reasoning processes. Subjecting viewpoints to the eyes of others beyond one's own group can help in overcoming potential blind spots and biases when decisions are justified only by the priorities of one's own group. This includes subjecting beliefs and reasoning to an impartial spectator, someone whose interests are not directly advanced by what happens to a particular group.[5] Consider how unjust positions—such as religious intolerance or gender-based discrimination—can go unchallenged if not subjected to critical scrutiny. Engaging in public reasoning—justifying positions in the eyes of an impartial spectator—can help limit the influence of such parochialism and curbs the possibility of vested interests of some groups dominating the procedures of social choice.

To sum up, procedures of social choice that allow for a diversity of perspectives, draw on agency and mitigate the influence of group biases can enhance collective action in many ways. They expand the possibilities for acting together, by drawing on a larger consensus than within-group agreement alone. They also open possibilities to draw on a wide range of values and actions beyond what the exclusively self-interested model of human behaviour suggests.

Notes

1. The description and value of public reasoning deliberation is based on Sen (2009b). **2.** Echoing the arguments made in Oreskes (2019). **3.** Uslaner 1999. **4.** Enke 2023b. **5.** This is an expression that Sen (2009b) borrows from Adam Smith. In contrast with Rawls (1993), Sen (2009b) argues that the possibility of having impartial spectators outside each country could break through parochialism.

undermining support for democratic norms and practices.[21] Social identity can also erode social preferences.[22] By tapping into the anger and biases that come from strong partisan identities, it fosters animosity between groups, even if their positions on issues are not that divergent.[23] Strategic identity signalling can lead to behaviours motivated by belonging to the group rather than by self-interest.[24] It intensifies social divides and heightens divisiveness in political and public life.[25] In the political sphere it can lead to the emergence of seemingly immovable and mutually distrusting political blocs, transforming political differences into divisive zero-sum battles of us versus them, with all the negative consequences described in chapter 4.

Affective polarization is widespread and increasing around the world.[26] It is affecting national and international politics that will shape how shared global challenges will be addressed in the decades to come.[27] Because polarization often translates into intolerance and an aversion to compromise and negotiation, it can lead to political gridlock and dysfunction. It does so in part by eroding trust across communities, impeding efforts to address major shared challenges, such as health crises, violent conflict and climate change. Since many of these issues engender opposing beliefs and intense political competition, polarization poses a major societal obstacle to addressing shared problems.[28]

Political polarization imperils cooperation

Having diversity in preferences and considering a diverse range of perspectives and priorities can enrich collective decisionmaking and action—it is the clustering and segregation of preferences into opposing groups that can harm collective action.[29] Indeed, political institutions have been designed to harness diversity, and even rivalry, to democratically serve the public interest. For instance, the arguments invoked by James Madison in designing the US constitution did not assume away competing interests. They sought, through fragmented and overlapping institutions of authority, to harness that diversity to build safeguards and adaptability to an ever-changing environment. If political polarization threatens that diversity, the very effectiveness of those institutional designs can be impaired.[30]

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Political polarization goes beyond differences in views between various social groups. It collapses people’s beliefs and preferences into differences defined by a single, salient group identity, coupled with animosity towards those with different viewpoints and priorities. It can have dramatic social and political consequences within societies (spotlight 6.1). This section explores how polarization impedes prospects for intergroup cooperation.

Beliefs tied to single or narrow identities

In many countries polarization parallels political campaigns that heighten the salience of narrow and exclusionary group identities.[31] Partisanship is often a key dividing line for polarization: it is fairly stable, and it is regularly incited through frequent political campaigning.[32] But other social identities can become politically salient as well, such as race, nationality, ethnicity and religion. In many parts of the world, polarization occurs around rifts that are framed as identity conflicts, leading to longstanding political cleavages.[33] Polarization often ensues when such identities are made politically salient, as other cross-cutting ties between groups diminish.[34]

Polarization can also emerge between groups holding competing political beliefs, opinions and worldviews, where holding a certain opinion is the basis of social identity.[35] The Brexit referendum gave rise to new social identities—Leaver and Remainer—which formed the basis of heightened affective polarization between those two groups.[36] In the United States and elsewhere, people’s self-identification with their vaccination status during the Covid-19 pandemic was evident in the animosity between vaccinated and unvaccinated groups and the polarized social responses to mandatory vaccination policies.[37]

Polarizing rhetoric has been described as a strategy of identifying someone over something to blame for group-based concerns and insecurities.[38] Economic, political or cultural anxieties create conditions for polarization. Declining economic opportunity and increasing inequality (whether real or perceived) can foster political polarization, leading people towards closer integration with their ingroups.[39] And cultural aspects can become more salient as wellbeing improves.[40] Furthermore, affective polarization has the potential to increase economic inequalities.[41] Insecurities can make people more receptive to polarizing messages—such as narratives that draw on a dominant group’s perceived loss of status or contentious debates framed as moral issues where people are likely to resist compromise (as seen in debates on gender).[42] The 2021/2022 Human Development Report showed that polarization and insecurity are closely linked: people who feel insecure are more likely to hold extreme political preferences and less likely to trust others.[43]

So, what matters is not the presence of group differences or disagreements—it is that all differences are collapsed into questions of a narrow or single identity. Polarization ensues when people's beliefs, attitudes and worldviews are closely tied to the groups they identify with, coupled with strong ingroup bias and loyalty, alongside antipathy and prejudice towards other groups. As discussed below, it diminishes the possibilities for acting together and lends itself to narratives rejecting pluralism.

Us versus them—the toxic brew of zero-sum thinking

Polarization is associated with people perceiving their differences as zero-sum, making them less likely to seek joint actions and identify shared goals. Zero-sum beliefs (see chapter 4) make people in polarized societies less likely to trust or associate with individuals from an opposing political or ideological camp[44] and more likely to seek social and moral distance from their perceived outgroups and describe their political opponents in dehumanizing or derogatory terms.[45]

> "Polarization shaped by zero-sum beliefs can alter the functioning of political institutions, leading to gridlock and dysfunction

By reducing wide-ranging political issues to questions of us versus them, where a group can gain only at the expense of the others losing, polarization can foster resistance to actions viewed as reflecting the values and priorities of outgroups. Because polarization delegitimizes unifying or middle-ground narratives, groups seeking common ground and collaboration in a context shaped by zero-sum beliefs can lose credibility and public support. This can diminish confidence in other social institutions, such as the media and civil society organizations, which come to be seen as biased and untrustworthy (spotlight 6.1).

Polarization shaped by zero-sum beliefs can also alter the functioning of political institutions, leading to gridlock and dysfunction. And because it is often deployed as a political strategy, it can create conditions for a vicious cycle: polarizing rhetoric and mobilization by one party leads opposing groups to also adopt polarizing messages.[46] When people view their political opponents not just as people with differing opinions but as enemies that gain at their expense, they tend to adopt a conflict mindset, viewing their own goals as attainable only by excluding outgroup members—and becoming more invested in addressing this perceived threat than in reconciling or cooperating with their opponents.[47] Opposing groups then lean towards more extreme beliefs and preferences, culminating in greater tolerance for behaviour that flaunts democratic norms and practices.[48] So, perceptions of political contests as zero-sum battles can lead polarized groups to become more willing to accept extraordinary measures.

Thus, polarization coupled with zero-sum beliefs has contributed to the recent support for populism and to threats to democratic norms and practices,[49] sometimes increasing support for authoritarianism.[50] Indeed, increasing support for authoritarianism is also correlated with increases in polarization,[51] breeding cynicism about compromise and tolerance, which are especially important for democratic processes.[52] Compromise becomes a betrayal of principles rather than a necessary part of the democratic process.

Threats to international cooperation

The rise in political polarization and zero-sum beliefs makes international cooperation more politicized and contested in domestic politics, enflaming beliefs and narratives about international institutions.[53] Partisanship and group affiliation often determine people's preferences on whether leaders should engage in international cooperation and how.[54] Thus, polarization can also contribute to policy instability, where shifts in political power are accompanied by dramatic policy changes, including on matters of international cooperation and engagement, with direct bearing on the prospects for the provision of global public goods.

Political polarization's impact on international cooperation is manifested, in part, through reduced support for official development assistance in more polarized high-income countries.[55] It is also manifested in reduced domestic support for global public goods, such as mitigating climate change.[56] Scepticism about international cooperation is not new.[57]

But there is a growing recognition that lack of domestic support for international cooperation has paralleled the increase in political polarization.[58] Between 1970 and 2019 there were 84 referendums concerning international cooperation (such as membership in international organisations), with an increase in recent decades.[59] There have been campaigns for withdrawing from international institutions in several countries.[60] The European Union, the World Trade Organization and international justice institutions have been described as facing legitimacy challenges.[61]

Taking into account the influence of beliefs, narratives and cultural factors on international cooperation helps in understanding today's heightened relationship between political polarization and support (or lack thereof) for international cooperation. People often hold strong beliefs and views about international issues, contrary to assumptions that people are uninformed or uninterested. People's beliefs about and preferences for foreign policy draw much from their moral values, worldviews and ideological orientations.[62] The way people conceptualize fairness influences their evaluation of burden sharing in international cooperation: those concerned with equity are less likely to support contributions to cooperative initiatives when other countries are perceived as not paying their fair share.[63] In Germany people's perceptions of transnational interdependence strengthen corresponding beliefs about the importance of international institutions for solving problems.[64]

Euroscepticism often draws on economic and cultural anxieties in shaping political polarization.[65] People who are hopeful about their societies view the European Union more positively than those who are fearful, with the latter less satisfied with the direction of policy and the quality of democracy in EU decisionmaking.[66] International cooperation has become more politically contentious in countries where political polarization around economic inequality and immigration has gained prominence in public debate.[67] The package of openness that international institutions are associated with—the combination of economic integration with exposure to foreign cultural influences and ideas—can contribute to perceptions of insecurity and become a fault line in political polarization.[68] Additional explanations run through perceptions, attitudes and beliefs and include popular support for leaders espousing nationalism, protectionist policies and opposition to outside influences, complementing economic explanations for backlash against international engagement (chapter 2).[69]

> "With rising polarization, international cooperation can be undermined by political campaigns against international institutions

With rising polarization, international cooperation can be undermined by political campaigns against international institutions. Participation in international institutions can become polarizing. Polarization can make the domestic political dynamics of international participation (domestic ratification processes) uncertain and disincentivize the executive branch of governments from entering agreements. Other nations may view a polarized country as less reliable and predictable in its foreign policy decisions, reducing trust in its commitments and alliances. One country's effort to contest international commitments and alliances can prompt others to do the same, contributing to a contagion effect.[70] And if such efforts are not seen to be reflected, for example, in international institutions that support those commitments and alliances, that can intensify contestation on the basis that the international institution in question has proven unwilling to accommodate demands.[71] This contagion is not a given, but the possibilities for contagion are shaped strongly by the extent to which people's existing beliefs are polarized.[72]

Since many global public goods are a matter of choice and agency, people's beliefs, shaped by narratives and ideas, are central for driving action on shared challenges. Political polarization diminishes the space for such action, given its association with zero-sum thinking, making it harder for people to recognize that there are options where all sides can gain. It steers decisionmaking away from collective action, leading instead to contentious battles between opposing political camps. It erodes the possibilities for addressing shared challenges between groups, instead fuelling mutual distrust and suspicion. Perceptions of insecurity exacerbate these dynamics, in part by making people more receptive to narratives of intergroup competition and constraining the possibilities for acting together (chapter 4).

Enhancing international collective action—now

Prospects for cooperation might seem uncertain given that domestic political polarization is compounded by geopolitical upheaval (spotlight 6.2). But international institutions, including the United Nations, have historically been both constrained and enabled in periods of geopolitical change (spotlight 6.3).[73] So, there is even more reason to pursue collective action, including through multilateral organizations.

International collective action can be enhanced along four avenues.

- Drawing on a broader understanding of behaviour, as discussed in chapter 4, may give more reason to see additional options going forward, since frames or narratives can shape the cultural and social context for behaviour and institutions. The provision of global public goods can put forward frames beyond zero-sum thinking.
- Expanding international financing for international cooperation beyond official development assistance to include financing for domestic contributions to global public goods.[74] This may imply new instruments and approaches,[75] but key considerations are the extent of domestic support to channel resources internationally and whether arguments to finance global public goods crowd out the motive to provide official development assistance. That crowding out appears unlikely.
- Leveraging the high correlation between trust in one another with trust in both national and multilateral institutions.
- Directly addressing political polarization.

Framing alternatives to zero-sum thinking

Zero-sum beliefs lead to predictable psychological reactions and behaviours driven by the idea that if one country gets ahead, others must be left behind, and vice-versa.[76] Narratives premised on zero-sum beliefs tend to make countries less inclined to cooperate with others[77] and are at the root of political polarization in some countries.[78]

Adequately provided global public goods are not zero-sum in that a country benefiting from or using a global public good does not detract from others doing the same. This does not mean that the benefits are equally shared. But recognizing that multiple parties can enjoy the benefits simultaneously may thus provide a framing that gives salience to the pursuit of opportunities for cooperation in arenas that are not zero-sum.[79] This is particularly the case for planetary public goods, a lens that could offer a new perspective on the inevitability of human mutuality and interdependence on a shared planet.[80]

> “Recognizing that multiple parties can enjoy the benefits of global public goods simultaneously may provide a framing that gives salience to the pursuit of opportunities for cooperation in arenas that are not zero-sum

In a selfish choice model of behaviour, agents seeking to advance their self-interest can act strategically, sacrificing their wellbeing to benefit others if there is reciprocity. But reciprocity is not the only mechanism that can lead to and sustain cooperation.[81] As discussed in chapter 4, Elinor Ostrom famously documented the variety of institutional arrangements that structure interactions among people and between people and common pool resources in a variety of mutual engagements that foster collective action in some respects, even when differences and disagreements persist in others.

Determining the regularities of these arrangements and whether they could be scaled up to the global level has been a topic of enduring debate.[82] But there is evidence that people can support unilateral action on some global public goods, not because they misunderstand the need for collective action but because they have a sense of commitment and obligation, particularly in countries where people perceive the need for the country to take a leadership role[83] and even when social norms are not supportive.[84]

Financing global public goods

International flows of resources can be motivated primarily by supporting low- or middle-income countries in making progress, as in official development assistance. Financing for global public goods follows a different rationale—international flows are meant to

enhance the receiving countries' ability to contribute to the provision of global public goods.[85] Still, even if the concern is purely motivated by, say, the pledge of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind, the provision of global public goods still matters, given that their underprovision can drive exclusion and inequality. Just consider how the underprovision of multiple global public goods during the Covid-19 pandemic widened inequalities and increased deprivations, as documented in part I of the Report. And looking ahead, failures or delays in providing the global public goods needed to mitigate climate change will increase inequalities, as documented in chapter 1, with some of the most harmful impacts of human development falling on people and countries already deprived.

Moreover, when the incidence of benefits from the provision of global public goods is favourable to those who have the least, that provision can be progressive. So, even those motivated by supporting poorer countries would have reason to support financing global public goods in those instances.[86]

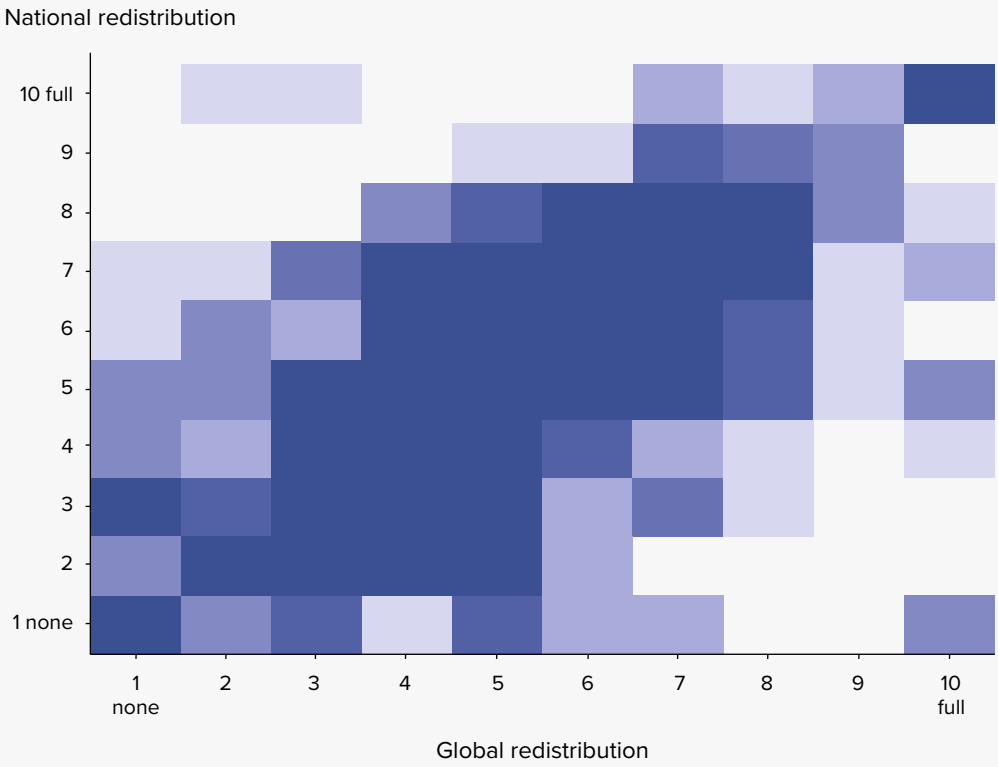
> "When the incidence of benefits from the provision of global public goods is favourable to those who have the least, that provision can be progressive

Using public resources internationally depends on support from domestic constituencies. A rationale to finance global public goods might be seen to risk alienating domestic constituencies that support international flows and development cooperation motivated by the support to reduce poverty and make low-income countries progress. Those reasons sustain support for humanitarian aid (saving lives) and income transfers to low-income countries and people living in fragile settings. To address this concern, it is important to establish, first, whether people who support income redistribution at the national level also support it internationally. Chapter 4 documented that preferences for redistribution vary within countries and are influenced by social preferences and by beliefs about whether inequalities are unfair—both of which are heterogenous across and within countries. In Germany, despite a high correlation between support for national and international redistribution (figure 6.1), the share of respondents who prefer the same redistribution in the national and global contexts was 42 percent. Others want extensive national and very little global redistribution and vice-versa. So, even though the correlation between national and international redistribution is high, it is not perfect, and additional factors beyond blanket support for redistribution must be at play.

While individual support for international flows of resources is a new area of study, the main determinants of that support (whatever the rationale for the flows) seem to be people's beliefs about the geographic and moral boundaries of concern.[87] Do people believe they hold moral obligations towards others anywhere in the world (a more universalist belief) or only to those who are closer or similar, including those living in the same country (a more parochial belief)? The variation in these beliefs is widespread both within and across countries, but it is possible to place individuals along a spectrum from lower to higher levels of universal beliefs. Evidence from 60 countries with 85 percent of the world's population and 90 percent of global GDP reveals a strong correlation between more universal beliefs and support for the global poor versus helping the local poor and for protecting the global environment versus protecting the local environment (figure 6.2). These results hold after country effects, income, education, age, gender, urban residence and religiosity are controlled for, consistent with evidence that within-country variation in support to political outcomes is more strongly associated with beliefs along the parochial-universal spectrum than with variables such as education and income.[88]

So, people who hold more parochial beliefs are not opposed to redistribution as such, since they support it when asked about local or community-based redistribution.[89] National redistribution in high-income countries in North America and Europe is highly impersonal,[90] typically not geared to support particular groups or communities. Thus, the correlation between national and global redistribution in countries such as Germany might be driven by a group of people sharing more universal beliefs. Given the insights about cultural differences in preferences and beliefs reviewed in chapter 4, one cannot assume that universalist beliefs in shaping attitudes towards global redistribution are universal. Indeed, the coefficients of regressions of political attitudes

Figure 6.1 Support for national redistribution is correlated with support for global redistribution in Germany, but some people want extensive national and very little global redistribution and vice-versa



Note: The correlation coefficient is 0.70 ($p < 0.0001$).
Source: Fehr, Mollerstrom and Perez-Truglia 2022.

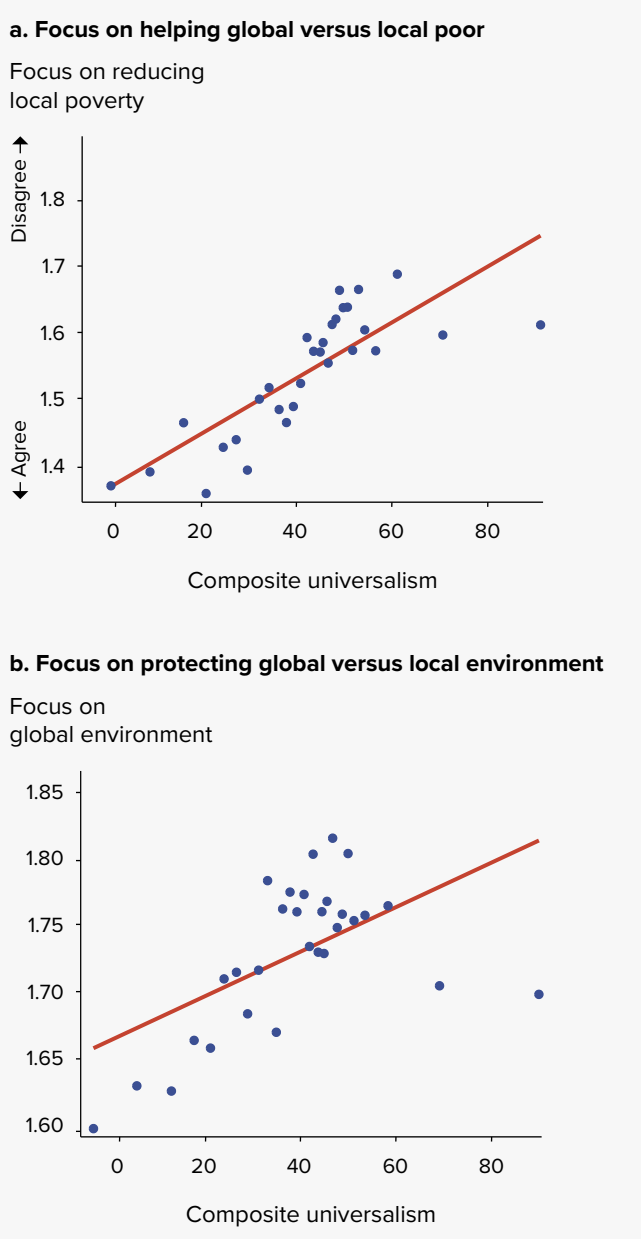
on universalism (with country effects controlled for) are positive for all high-income countries but lower for rich non-WEIRD countries (western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic)—and even lower for low- and middle-income countries (figure 6.3).

There is thus little reason to believe that presenting a rationale for international flows from high-income countries to finance global public goods would dilute a commitment to international flows based on motives linked to reducing poverty or saving lives, given that the underlying motive for domestic public support for international flows is associated with less parochial beliefs. Moreover, enhancing the provision of many global public goods is key to reducing global inequalities as well as vulnerability to poverty and other deprivations. In addition, some evidence suggests that people in low- and middle-income countries do not always favour international aid as a means of reducing intercountry inequality,[91] with recipients more interested in framings that address justice and enhance dignity and agency[92] than in charity-based rationales that recipients may perceive as stigmatizing.[93]

Advancing equity is also associated with higher domestic support for international agreements perceived as fair, along with low domestic costs of implementation and, crucially, whether other countries also participate.[94] In high-income countries domestic support to finance global public goods depends in part on the level of ambition in other countries.[95] This observation is in line with domestic constituencies and political leaders caring about how their countries are portrayed in the international context,[96] as in global performance indicators.[97] Still, the impact is not uniform across the population, with some groups more likely than others to have their views shaped by these factors,[98] making political polarization particularly relevant.

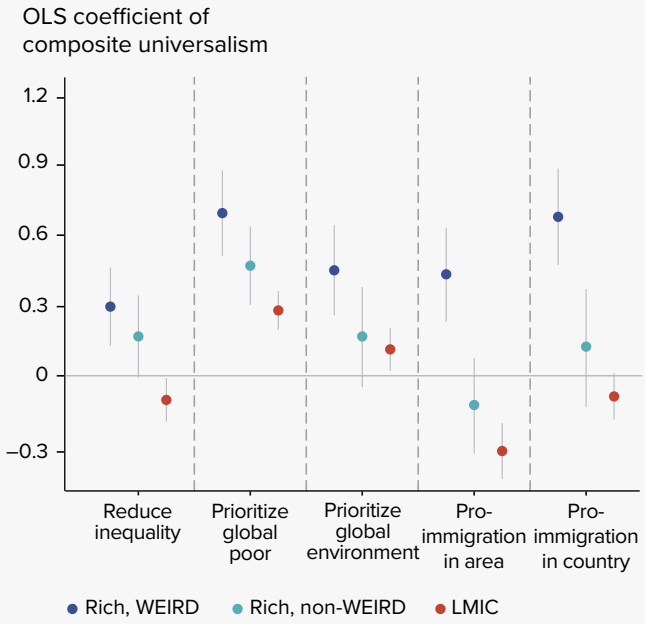
In sum, countries may (and do) find it hard to agree on providing global public goods. But advancing arguments for financing them does not necessarily

Figure 6.2 More universalist beliefs are correlated with concerns both for the global poor and for the global environment



Note: The scatter plots average agreement with a policy priority for a given level of universalist beliefs, with country fixed effects controlled for. Policy priorities on the vertical axes are coded as 1–4, with 1 corresponding to "strongly disagree" and 4 to "strongly agree." The index of composite universalism is constructed based on how respondents allocated hypothetical money between a specific ingroup member and a random stranger. The decision is disinterested in that respondents were told that they could not keep any of the money for themselves. Robust evidence suggests that results are similar for hypothetical and real allocations of resources and that it makes little difference when the question is asked invoking a moral concern or avoiding any reference to moral obligations. The positive correlations are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).
Source: Cappelen, Enke and Tungodden 2022.

Figure 6.3 Universalist beliefs are associated with global redistribution and global environment in high-income countries, but the cultural context matters



OLS is ordinary least squares.
Note: The vertical axis shows the coefficients of ordinary least squares regressions of agreement with policy priorities on composite universalism, as defined in the note to figure 6.2. Each coefficient can be interpreted as the change in agreement with a policy priority (on a scale of 1–4) in response to moving the index of composite universalism from 0 to 100. Whiskers show 95 percent confidence intervals. WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic) countries comprise Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Rich, non-WEIRD countries are Chile, Czechia, Croatia, Hungary, Israel, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Poland. LMIC corresponds to a subset of low- and middle-income countries included in the analysis.
Source: Cappelen, Enke and Tungodden 2022.

imply less support for international flows from high-income countries. Financing global public goods is likely to result in the need to substantially increase international flows and potential domestic resource mobilization in high-income countries. But it is likely to enhance global equity through two channels. One, by mitigating the drivers of inequality associated with the underprovision of global public goods. And two, by generating ancillary national benefits, such as less local pollution or poverty through job creation (typically one of the explicit intents of official development assistance). Multilateral institutions might need to more clearly articulate their potential role in channelling these resources, building—but also expanding—on their track record of pooling and allocating international financial resources to meet

country needs. This is well established in the humanitarian realm, for instance, with strong evidence suggesting that when the United Nations allocates humanitarian assistance, it does so on the basis of actual needs and is not driven by other considerations.[99] The expansion would need to include supporting low- and middle-income countries to contribute to global public goods.

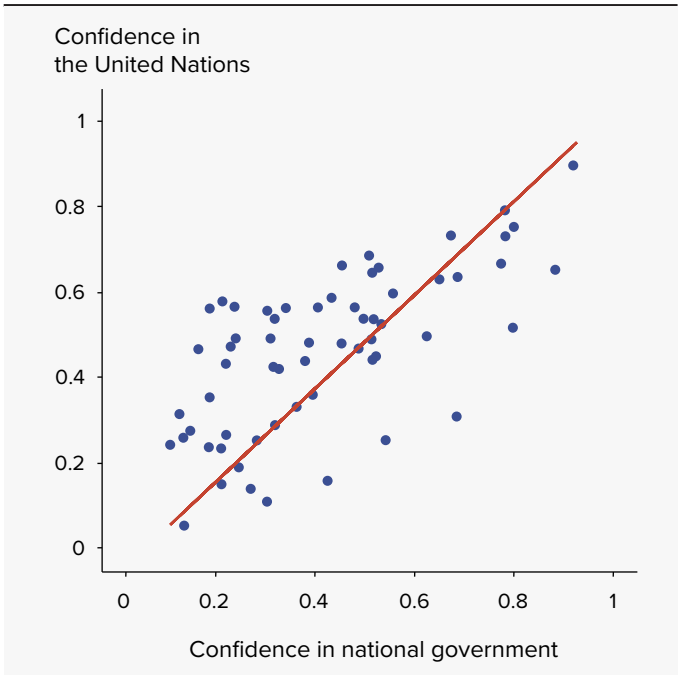
Building trust in international institutions through trust in national institutions

Generalized trust reflects people's beliefs in the inherent integrity of others and contributes to cooperative action at scale.[100] It is linked to a range of socially beneficial outcomes, and its importance for economic performance is widely documented.[101] It is also linked to such outcomes as greater political stability and faster recovery from economic crises.[102] It is especially relevant for cooperating with those one knows little about—or in uncertain situations.[103] For international cooperation, trust facilitates collective action. Indeed, international cooperation would be nearly impossible without a basic belief that countries will respect their commitments, which also enhances multilateral institutions' ability to function.[104]

While trust in institutions is difficult to specify with precision,[105] positive evaluations of institutions (particularly state institutions) have been associated with support for climate action[106] and are linked with generalized trust.[107] For example, the belief that state institutions are effective punishers of free riders enhances generalized trust.[108] Confidence in national and international institutions is more than 10 percentage points higher among people with generalized trust (table 6.1). This is consistent with evidence that more-trusting individuals also view international institutions more positively and show greater support for compromising with other countries.[109]

Although "confidence in institutions" has varying interpretations and depends on multiple factors, confidence in the national government explains two-thirds of the variance in national averages of confidence in the United Nations (figure 6.4). Assessments

Figure 6.4 Confidence in national institutions is correlated with confidence in multilateral institutions, key for international collective action



Note: Confidence in institutions (the national government and the United Nations) implies reporting "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence (other options: "not very much" or "none at all").
Source: Human Development Report Office based on data from the World Values Survey (Inglehart and others 2022).

Table 6.1 Confidence in national and international institutions is higher among people who trust others

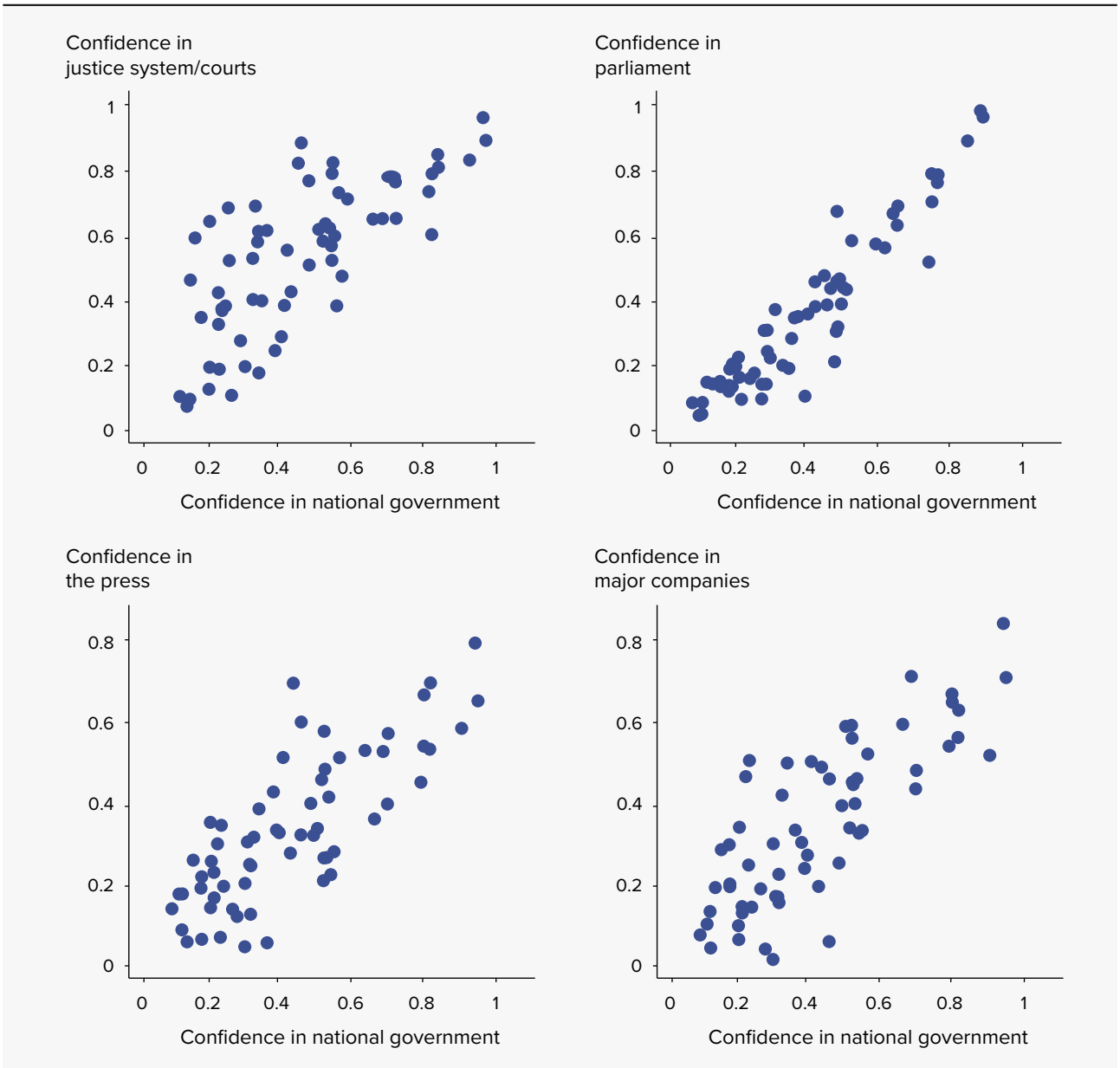
		People who do not trust others (generalized trust)			People who trust others (generalized trust)		
		Confidence in national government			Confidence in national government		
		No	Yes	Total	No	Yes	Total
Confidence in the United Nations	No	41.0	14.9	55.9	28.2	16.6	44.8
	Yes	17.6	26.5	44.1	17.9	37.3	55.2
	Total	58.6	41.4	100.0	46.0	54.0	100.0

Note: Generalized trust implies reporting that "most people can be trusted" (other option: "need to be very careful"). Confidence in institutions (the national government and the United Nations) implies reporting "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence (other options: "not very much" or "none at all").
Source: Human Development Report Office based on data from the World Values Survey, using individual observations across countries with data.

of confidence in other institutions relevant for collective action are also highly correlated with confidence in the national government (figure 6.5).

The link between trust in national and international institutions implies that perceptions of the legitimacy of national institutions predict the perceived legitimacy of international institutions.[110] There is also evidence that communication by national institutions (governments or civil society organizations) on the performance of international organizations has more impact on the perceived legitimacy of international institutions than direct communication by international organizations themselves.[111] To the extent that political polarization both undermines confidence in institutions (national and international) and is associated with perceptions of insecurity that also undermine interpersonal trust, addressing it could be a lever to enhance trust in both national and international institutions, as well as interpersonal trust.

Figure 6.5 Confidence in several institutions is highly correlated with confidence in the national government



Note: Confidence in institutions (national government, justice system/courts, parliament, the press, major companies) implies reporting "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence (other options: "not very much" or "none at all").
Source: Human Development Report Office based on data from the World Values Survey (Inglehart and others 2022).

Polarization intensifies ingroup trust while eroding outgroup trust. While high ingroup trust is not inherently a problem, its combination with an erosion in generalized trust can impair cooperation between groups. Polarization and declines in generalized trust can be mutually reinforcing.[112] Thus, tackling polarization could enhance intergroup cooperation.[113]

Tackling polarization directly

This chapter has argued that polarization hinders collective action across social groups and that there are ways to address it indirectly, as discussed up to now. But there are also ways to tackle it directly, three of which are explored here—by acting on people's misperceptions about issues and about the groups that they do not affiliate with, by enhancing cross-cutting social ties that transcend group divisions and by addressing perceptions of insecurity.

Addressing misperceptions about issues and about other groups

At the individual level the belief that climate change is human-caused is widespread.[114] But individual beliefs alone do not determine collective action—what people believe others think about climate change also matters.[115] For example, while 69 percent of people around the world report being willing to sacrifice some of their income to contribute to climate change mitigation, only 43 percent perceive others believing the same (a 26 percentage point misperception gap).[116] A recent survey in the United States found that 80–90 percent of respondents understand the challenge of climate change. And while 66–80 percent of all respondents support action to mitigate climate change, respondents estimated that the prevalence of that support in the rest of the population was only 37–43 percent.[117] Around the world many people experience a "false social reality by underestimating popular climate policy support."[118] In other words people agree on more than they think they do. These misperceptions are pervasive and extend to other concerns that require collective action.[119] Misperceiving others' beliefs can lead to the persistence of pluralistic ignorance,[120] which sustains policies or political arrangements that are inconsistent with prevailing individual beliefs.[121] In contrast, motivating societywide responses to collective action challenges can be enhanced if these misperceptions are addressed.[122]

Misperceptions imply biased beliefs about what others think about actual events and facts and can be polarizing when people hold misperceptions about what outgroups think of them (spotlight 6.4).[123] They can also emerge not only within societies but also across countries and can lead to misunderstandings and even conflict.[124] Such misperceptions can drive people to hold more extreme beliefs than they would otherwise—people evaluate others' positions when forming their own opinions and are therefore led to adopt more extreme positions.[125]

Misperceptions in the general population affect the positions of political leaders, who often vastly overestimate the animosity among different groups, leading to further misperceptions and related polarization, as well as the erosion of democratic norms.[126] People often hold (incorrect) beliefs about others that reinforce their own beliefs.[127] Misperceptions can be further compounded because people tend to interact more often with those who share their own views and consume information that confirms their biases about others.[128] Polarized societies also tend to be vulnerable to misinformation, given that affectively biased people are more likely to engage in forms of motivated reasoning,[129] with misinformation, even on otherwise neutral issues, potentially further entrenching misperceptions. The media environment (including social media) and leaders' messaging often play central roles in the emergence and persistence of misperceptions.[130]

> "People agree on more than they think they do. Misperceiving others' beliefs can lead to the persistence of pluralistic ignorance, which sustains policies or political arrangements that are inconsistent with prevailing individual beliefs

Misperceptions can shape public support across a range of issues. This includes support for income redistribution, which is sensitive to misperceptions about the extent of income inequality in society, about beliefs of the fairness of the origin of inequality and beliefs about where a person sits on the income distribution.[131] It also includes misperceptions

about immigration—in several high-income countries the share of immigrants in the population is perceived to be two to three times higher than the actual share—with the misperception gap hovering around 20 percentage points, independent of education, income, gender, political affiliation and other factors (figure 6.6).[132]

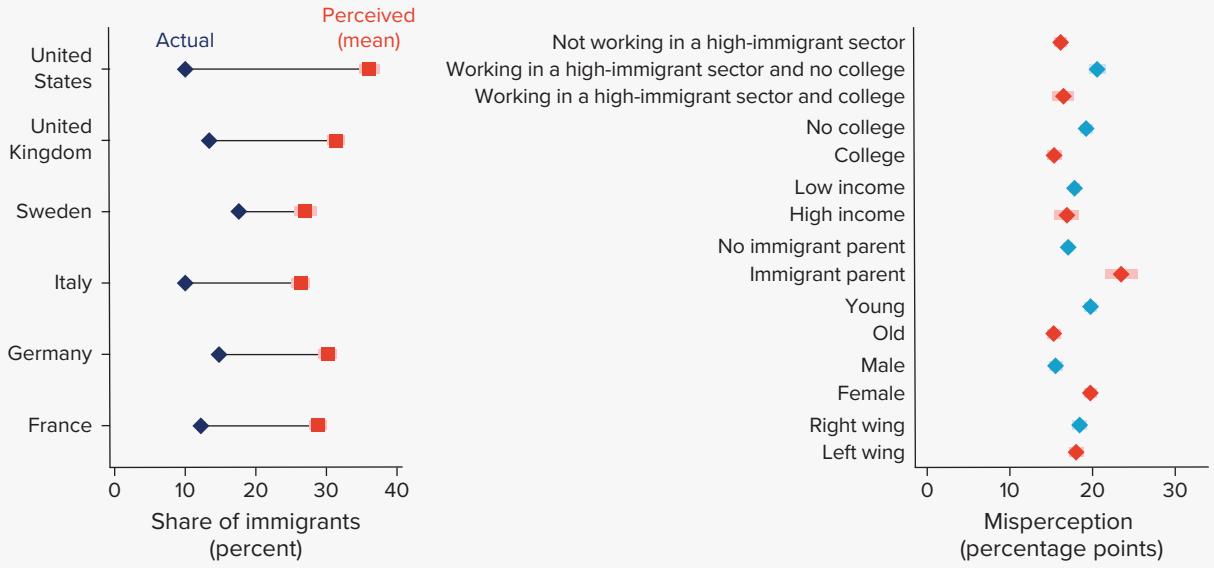
The focus in this chapter is how incorrect beliefs about others can exaggerate perceived differences between groups and hamper action on shared challenges.[133] Misperceptions of what different groups within countries deem fair and appropriate, as with countries, can lead to misunderstandings and even conflict.[134] While the underlying cognitive and social processes that lead to misperceptions are common across the population, misperceiving others' beliefs can lead to alienation and hostility across groups—and even to dehumanization.[135] Misperceptions about polarization can operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy, deepening and entrenching polarization.[136] They obscure the true distributions of beliefs about political issues, which can result in gaps between people's preferences and the actual terms of policy debates.[137]

Correcting people's misperceptions about others can have a positive impact on intergroup cooperation (spotlight 6.4).[138] People update their political views when they have information about their political opponents.[139] Providing accurate information about the proportion of immigrants living in a country also changes people's beliefs.[140] Exposing people to the true distribution of others' support for "pro-climate" policies increases support for those policies.[141] Correcting people's perceptions about polarization can stem polarization, leading polarized groups to moderate their opinions of their political opponents.[142]

Less clear is whether these information-based interventions can lead to long-lasting behavioural change. If the links between group identities and misperceptions persist, information-based interventions might not be long-lasting—particularly if group leaders and segments of the media continue to feed narratives that foster misperceptions.[143] The beliefs and convictions among people in highly polarized societies are cognitively and affectively loaded, which can make them resistant to change.[144] Indeed, polarization often contributes to cognitive rigidity (a reluctance to update beliefs in light of new information).[145]

In a highly complex information environment, people are commonly exposed to competing information, and ingroup biases can lead people to discredit or distrust information that conflicts with their existing beliefs.[146] So, efforts that address the cognitive and affective bases of misperceptions can help. Interventions that facilitate more deliberative processing

Figure 6.6 The misperception of the share of immigrants in the population is high and widely shared across society



Source: Stantcheva, Alesina and Miano 2019.

of information can work against people's tendency to arrive at oversimplified beliefs.[147] For example, in contexts of intergroup conflict, presenting information in a frame that induces sadness rather than provoking anger has been found to be depolarizing.[148] Interventions that rely on qualitative and narrative-based approaches, such as storytelling and vignettes, have been particularly effective in shifting misperceptions.[149] Recent evidence suggests that correcting misperceptions about climate change of the sort with which this section started is an effective way of changing people's behaviour to act to mitigate climate change (but not necessarily changing beliefs).[150]

Creating space to bridge divides

Emphasizing overlapping identities can be a powerful antidote to intergroup hostility.[151] Polarization often leads people to underestimate their commonalities with others. Recognizing that people hold multifaceted identities can mitigate against categorizing others as less deserving of concern, humanizing those otherwise perceived as adversaries.[152] A sense of shared identity need not be built on a superordinate category —such as national identity—which comes with the potential risk of creating other outgroups. Rather than depend on a single overarching similarity, emphasizing the diversity in people's identities allows for multiple cross-cutting ties to be built, countering the likelihood of any one cleavage dominating.[153] Identifying points of similarity allows groups to discover shared values and concerns, diminishing the otherness often associated with strong biases against outgroups and perceived political opponents.

"Identifying points of similarity allows groups to discover shared values and concerns, diminishing the otherness often associated with strong biases against outgroups and perceived political opponents

A complementary approach for bridging differences emphasizes encouraging intergroup contact.[154] This is often the basis of proposals for more deliberative decisionmaking structures, such as citizen assemblies, which bring representative groups together to collectively debate issues (see also chapter 5 on the importance of public reasoning and deliberation). Deliberation is distinct from simple discussion of differences; it involves structured engagements that are substantive, inclusive and even-handed in considering diverse perspectives.[155] Deliberative structures have been found to mitigate political polarization.[156] Suggested mechanisms for this effect include that deliberative structures allow people to practice empathy (by taking the perspective of those they perceive to be opponents) or experience others as equals working towards a shared goal.[157] Deliberative processes can enhance people's understanding of the issues at hand, increase confidence in cooperative approaches and encourage respect and tolerance for those with different views.

That said, the effectiveness of deliberation in tackling polarization depends on certain conditions.[158] Perhaps most important is relative equality between participants—structures where some groups or interests dominate others clearly work against the equal and fair consideration of all perspectives.[159] Enhancing equality in this respect might rely on efforts to address inequalities beyond the interpersonal dynamics of small deliberative groups.[160] Deliberation is also unlikely to overcome divides if the goals of participating groups are (or are perceived to be) fundamentally incompatible. So, arriving at some shared goals that all participants can agree on can be a precondition for a deliberative process to overcome divides.[161] This is not to say that depolarizing interventions based on deliberation depend on first achieving full equality; instead, working towards relative equality and a shared sense of purpose deserves additional attention in this strategy for tackling polarization.

Addressing perceptions of insecurity

Polarization and mistrust draw on real and perceived insecurities felt by strongly identified groups.[162] Easing narratives of insecurity can help in allaying the underlying fear and anxieties that might make people more receptive to polarizing messages about other groups. Social policies that tackle insecurities are clearly important in this respect, particularly those that build solidarity between groups facing common threats.[163]

An agenda of providing global public goods can expand the possibilities for navigating insecurity together, offering people and societies a greater sense

of agency and control in a turbulent world.[164] Such an agenda presents an opportunity for building a new narrative of possibility and hope rather than anxiety, as well as a strategy for getting there. In this way, pursuing the provision of global public goods—a goal—can also be a means towards having a beneficial impact on stemming polarization.

> "Frames associated with providing global public goods could power collective action on urgent challenges, given that the evidence on the political effects of emergency frames alone in advancing action on climate and broader sustainability challenges is mixed

In fact, the use of frames to address collective action is pervasive in the current debate on global challenges, given strong evidence that they affect how people interpret reality, form beliefs and develop value orientations about their needs and aspirations.[165] It has been argued that shifts in frames are associated with major changes in culture, society and the economy. For example, a key cultural change associated with the Enlightenment was the conviction that science and technology could improve living standards.[166] Today, action to address global challenges often draws on emergency frames, supported by science but also strategically deployed to stimulate collective action, as for climate change.[167] Frames associated with providing global public goods could power collective action on urgent challenges, given that the evidence on the political effects of emergency frames alone in advancing action on climate and broader sustainability challenges is mixed.[168]

Moreover, as discussed in chapter 4, cooperation can collapse if there is uncertainty about where the dangerous threshold often invoked in emergency frames lies. This feature of uncertainty has been mobilized by powerful opponents of regulation on challenges from tobacco to fossil fuels to hinder public support for collective action.[169] In addition, those who strongly oppose climate action tend not only to use uncertainty as an argument but also to emphasize purported negative impacts of climate action on consumers.[170]

However, the collapse of cooperation under uncertainty thresholds, discussed in chapter 4, can happen even without the strategic mobilization of uncertainty by opponents of climate action. If emergency frames engender fear when used exclusively, they can motivate people to retreat even more to their ingroup, particularly in contexts of uncertainty.[171] When this happens, it can exacerbate political polarization within countries: while fear is a powerful driver of ingroup cooperation, more entrenched and polarized groups are less likely to find common ground.[172] If people feel that they have little agency to affect climate change, relying on emergency frames alone can spur anxiety and distress, particularly in young people.[173]

In contrast, the most common way for people to have agency in addressing climate change—how they perceive capacities to act to mitigate climate change—is through being part of a process of collective action (a sense that individual actions are meaningfully embedded in a broader social process).[174] People tend to support climate change action if they believe policies will be effective and fair.[175] Moreover, there is less polarization over concrete ways of acting (for instance, less polarization on advancing renewable energy than on how much one should be concerned about climate change).[176] The urgency to act on climate change and other global challenges cannot be underemphasized,[177] particularly because many people do respond to new information about climate challenges in updating their beliefs.[178] Supplementing emergency frames with an articulation of the aspiration to provide global public goods could foster international collective action and ease political polarization.[179]

SPOTLIGHT 6.1

Identity, polarization and their societal and political consequences

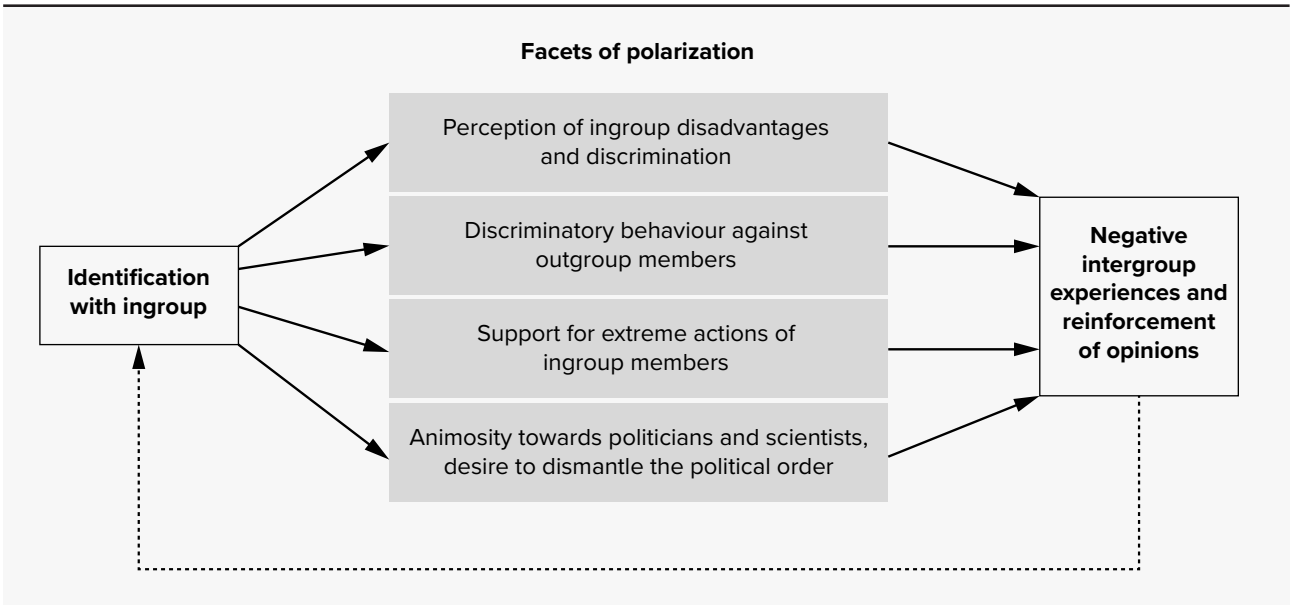
Robert Böhm, *University of Vienna and University of Copenhagen;* **Philipp Sprengholz,** *University of Bamberg and Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine;* **Luca Henkel,** *University of Chicago and University of CEMA;* **Cornelia Betsch,** *University of Erfurt and Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine*

Polarization is a growing concern, affecting societies worldwide. It signifies a deepening divide between groups holding contrasting viewpoints on political matters and on approaches to addressing complex societal issues.[1] This polarization becomes evident in uncompromising stances on critical topics such as mitigating climate change,[2] controlling infectious disease[3] and combating misinformation.[4] To illustrate, discussions surrounding the adequacy of climate policies have intensified in recent years, with one faction advocating for more stringent measures and another insisting on less restrictive ones. These opinion-based groups are increasingly drifting apart, making reconciliation challenging. Nevertheless, as the global climate crisis and numerous other societal challenges require extensive and large-scale human cooperation transcending group boundaries,[5] polarization itself emerges as a significant societal obstacle, hindering our ability to address pressing issues of our time.

To effectively mitigate polarization and the danger it poses to addressing societal challenges, we must understand the nature of polarization and its consequences in the first place. Specifically, what are the facilitating and diminishing factors of polarization in response to societal challenges, and what are its consequences for attitudes towards behaviours?

A wide range of literature has shown that polarization is driven partly by people incorporating opinion-based groups into their self-concept[6]—in their beliefs about who they are and how they relate to others. We suggest that strong identification with one's group (ingroup) can pave the way for biased attitudes and discriminatory behaviours towards people with opposing viewpoints (outgroup). In addition, polarization results in strongly identified minorities who hold

Figure S6.1.1 How group identification might increase polarization



Source: Authors' creation based on Henkel and others (2023) and Sprengholz and others (2023a).

attitudes likely to undermine societal cohesion and democracy (figure S6.1.1). The rest of this spotlight reports evidence for these relations from studies on the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change.

From individual attitudes to opinion-based groups

Polarization frequently arises in discussions of topics central to individuals' identities when there is uncertainty surrounding available information. Consider climate change: both the adverse effects of climate change and the strategies to mitigate it hold major implications for people's lives. But predicting the exact consequences and outcomes is challenging given their inherently uncertain and multicausal nature. In social and information-rich environments characterized by such uncertainty, individuals tend to come together and form bonds. A key aspect of this shift from individual attitudes to social categorization is that people tend to identify with other people who share their beliefs, opinions and attributes, often leading to similar behaviours among them. This phenomenon of group formation and identification reflects how people seek common ground and solidarity when grappling with complex, uncertain issues of personal significance.

A large body of literature in psychology has shown that people's degree of group identification can be reliably measured using surveys.[7] Building on established group identification scales,[8] we developed a five-item survey to assess identification with opinion-based groups (for example, "I have a lot in common with people who are vaccinated" or "I have a lot in common with people who think the federal government's climate policy has gone too far"). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each item on a seven-point scale from 0, "do not agree at all," to 7, "very much agree." The items capture different dimensions of group identification.

With both Covid-19 vaccination[9] and climate policies,[10] many individuals hold high group identification (with an average level of group identification greater than 4). A December 2021 study in Germany found that 56 percent of unvaccinated participants and 67 percent of vaccinated participants reported strongly identifying with their own vaccination status. In a similar vein, a study in Germany on climate policies found that 53 percent of people who demanded stricter climate policies and 63 percent of those who wanted policies to do less reported high group identification. About 61 percent of people who considered current climate policies about all right strongly identified with their climate policy opinion group, compared with only 35 percent of people who did not care about climate policy.

So, not only is there a considerable prevalence of individuals with strong identification across different (opposite-minded) groups, but there is also substantial variation in the degree of identification between these groups. These differences could lead to differences in perceptions, attitudes and behaviours, explored next.

Perceived and actual discrimination between opinion-based groups

Being a part of and identifying with opinion-based groups is not inherently negative; in fact, it can serve as a source of connection and support, particularly during uncertain and crisis-ridden periods.[11] Group formation may benefit both groups and their individual members. For example, in the context of health decisions, people who identify as active and sportive may find groups of likeminded people that help them maintain their physical activity plans.[12] But the process of social categorization, grounded in attitudes, opinions and attributes, can also have unintended consequences. It might lead to distorted perceptions and discriminatory behaviours that reinforce one's own identity by establishing a sense of superiority over others.[13] This dual nature of group categorization and identification—support and cooperation within but discrimination and conflict between groups—underscores the importance of understanding its dynamics in response to societal challenges to mitigate potential harms.

In the Covid-19 vaccination study mentioned above, 82 percent of unvaccinated respondents perceived public discourse around vaccination as unfair, moralistic and patronizing, compared with only 23 percent of vaccinated respondents.[14] Importantly, this perception was moderated by respondents' vaccination status identification. That is, higher group identification was associated with perceiving the public discourse as

slightly more positive among vaccinated respondents but with perceiving it as considerably more negative among unvaccinated respondents.

But how do such discriminatory perceptions relate to factual discrimination between opinion-based groups? To answer this question, participants had to distribute 100 euros between themselves and another person in a series of tasks. The other person was presented either as a member of the same group (same vaccination status or climate policy position—ingroup) or as a member of a different group (different vaccination status or climate policy position—outgroup). Intergroup discrimination was calculated by subtracting the amount allocated to an ingroup member in one task from the amount allocated to an outgroup member in the other task. In the vaccination study[15] vaccinated respondents showed larger intergroup discrimination (an average of 18.40 euros) than unvaccinated respondents (7.37 euros). That is, vaccinated respondents gave smaller amounts to unvaccinated respondents than unvaccinated respondents gave to vaccinated respondents, while the amount given to ingroup members was similar for both groups.

In the climate policy study,[16] there was also substantial intergroup discrimination, which varied according to the ingroup and outgroup. While people from the two extreme groups, who wanted either more or fewer climate protection policies, were most discriminatory toward each other, they discriminated equally against those who did not care about climate policy. Interestingly, those who found climate policies all right were more discriminated against by people who wanted less climate protection than by those who wanted more.

In both studies, discrimination against people in other-minded groups was strongly related to respondents' level of group identification. Specifically, the more that people identified with their ingroup, the stronger they discriminated against outgroups. These results provide support for our assumption that group identification undermines cooperative solutions across group boundaries.

Societal and political consequences

In the vaccination study, unvaccinated respondents were asked whether they would demonstrate or sign a petition against mandatory vaccination in December 2021.[17] This intention was used to predict whether they had attended a demonstration or signed a petition when they were surveyed again in February 2022. Respondents' behavioural intention predicted actual behaviour. Importantly, the effect was moderated by self-reported group identification, with a stronger intention–behaviour link between those who reported higher identification with the unvaccinated group. In another survey, vaccination status identification related to the perceived appropriateness of political action during the Covid-19 pandemic.[18] Vaccinated and unvaccinated respondents who had low identification with their vaccination status rated the political actions taken during the pandemic as similarly appropriate. In contrast, having a higher identification with vaccination status was associated with a larger perceived appropriateness for vaccinated respondents, whereas appropriateness ratings decreased for highly identified unvaccinated respondents.

Moreover, data collected from 10 countries showed that those who found past Covid-19 pandemic measures inappropriate had a stronger desire to punish politicians and scientists for their handling of the pandemic and were less willing to vote, instead favouring dismantling the entire political order. This suggests that identification with opinion-based groups is associated with several societal and political consequences that go beyond the specific opinion-based context and the interactions between these opinion-based groups.

Similar effects were observed for climate policy opinion groups.[19] Given that societies have seen extreme forms of protest for both more and less climate protection, we investigated whether identification played a role in how extreme protests are accepted. German participants who wanted less climate protection read a short text about a hypothetical subgroup called the freedom fighters, seeking the continued use of fossil fuels and demanding that citizens be able to freely decide how they travel, heat or eat. Participants who wanted more climate protection read about the climate fighters, advocating for immediate phaseout of fossil fuel use and demanding environmentally friendly travel, heating and eating.

Both subgroups drew attention to their causes by organizing demonstrations in many cities, damaging

political party buildings and blocking roads to the parliament. About 17 percent of those wanting more climate protection and 22 percent of those wanting less showed increased support for the presented subgroup, 8 percent of those wanting more climate protection and 11 percent of those wanting less were willing to join a demonstration organized by the subgroup and 8 percent of those wanting more climate protection and 10 percent of those wanting less were willing to donate money for the defence of a subgroup member who was recently arrested and charged with criminal damage. Support for the respective subgroup increased with higher group identification, providing further evidence for the important role of group identification.

Potential implications

The question of how to tackle pressing societal challenges, such as climate change or global health crises, often gives rise to opposite opinions, which can lead to the formation of opposing opinion-based groups and societal polarization. Our argument, supported by evidence, suggests that as individuals increasingly identify with these groups, their attitudes and behaviours are more likely to be polarized. This creates a troubling cycle (see figure S6.1.1) where opinions are continually reinforced, resulting in groups that are unwilling to engage in peaceful interactions or seek common ground. In essence, identifying with opinion-based groups undermines the very cooperation that is crucial for addressing societal challenges on a universal scale.

Our understanding of the intricate interplay among individual attitudes, group identification and polarization is still in its early stages. Future research endeavours are essential to delve deeper into the various causal pathways at play and to pinpoint effective interventions for mitigating polarization. Social and behavioural scientists have proposed various interventions to reduce group-based discrimination and conflict—for example, through decategorization (emphasizing the unique individual characteristics of outgroup members) and recategorization (integrating ingroup and outgroup members within a common group). Some of these might be helpful in reducing polarization of opinions, but they remain to be critically tested in these domains. Another promising avenue involves participatory approaches, where individuals from opposing opinion-based groups are actively engaged in collaborative efforts to discover common ground. These approaches hold potential for bridging divides and fostering constructive dialogue among stakeholders.

NOTES

1. Pew Research Center 2014.
2. Falkenberg and others 2022.
3. Bor, Jørgensen and Petersen 2023; Flores and others 2022.
4. Lazer and others 2018.
5. Van Lange and Rand 2022.
6. Ellemers, Spears and Doosje 2002.
7. Stets and Serpe 2013.
8. Doosje, Ellemers and Spears 1995; Roth and Mazziotta 2015.
9. Henkel and others 2023.
10. Sprengholz and others 2023a.
11. Hogg 2007.
12. Eys, Bruner and Martin 2019.
13. Tajfel and others 1979.
14. Henkel and others 2023.
15. Henkel and others 2023.
16. Sprengholz and others 2023a.
17. Henkel and others 2023.
18. Sprengholz and others 2023b.
19. Sprengholz and others 2023a.

SPOTLIGHT 6.2

International collective action in a time of geopolitical upheaval

To characterize the geopolitical context, it is useful to draw from different views to explain (and sometimes to predict) the behaviour of states (or, with greater generality, politically autonomous units) in the international arena.

Realism—power is ever changing

The field of international relations considers how states interact internationally when there is no overarching authority. The field has multiple perspectives,[1] dating back at least to Thucydides, who inspired the realist disposition in international relations.[2] This perspective emphasizes how anarchy in world politics (due to the lack of an overarching authority) drives constant instability, given that states all struggle to advance their security and power (to compel others to act on one's behalf).[3] The distribution of power across countries, and its change over time, informs the security threats that states face—or believe they face—as a result of, for instance, the security dilemma, also known as the Thucydides trap.[4]

The distribution of power is ever-changing. More than whether the world is bipolar, unipolar or multipolar, what matters are the continually changing dynamics of power among states, which tend to be destabilizing. And human behaviour remains the same—driving states to be ever-more ambitious rather than sated. So, there is no endpoint of stability. Once a disagreement is settled, a new one is bound to emerge because of the changing dynamics of power between states, so that "disputes in world politics are less problems to be solved than relations to be managed."[5] Although not inevitably, these disputes can culminate in violent conflict.[6]

Liberalism—realizing aggregated preferences

The liberal perspective on international relations shares the realists' view that the international arena is anarchic but has a different disposition on state behaviour that makes the implications of anarchy less troubling. States are not agents as such but are assumed to represent the aggregate preferences of what emerges from domestic economic and political processes where individuals and groups (the ultimate agents here) exchange and interact to promote their diverse interests.[7] State behaviour is then determined by how each state pursues the realization of the preferences it represents, given the constraints imposed by the preferences that other states present. When preferences are mutually compatible, states coexist peacefully and cooperatively. When they are mixed (compatible in part, but with scope for mutual gains), states can negotiate some accommodation (more easily through coordination), perhaps facilitated by international institutions.[8] When they are incompatible and zero-sum (if one wins, the other loses), there is tension and potentially conflict.

Constructivism—recognizing that much is socially constructed

Some researchers have argued that social constructs, which can include norms, may constrain state behaviour and make "the world hang together."[9] Norms are sometimes supported by, and codified in, multilateral agreements and institutions.[10] In the more assertive elaborations of these constructive perspectives on international relations, even the notion of anarchy is presumed to be socially constructed—and what states make of it[11]—and thus to represent an entirely different disposition from realism and liberalism. But while constructivism is sometimes presented as an alternative to both realism and idealism, it is perhaps better understood as an approach (thus compatible with at least some theories in both realism and liberalism) that recognizes that shared beliefs and norms shape state behaviour, whether they seek to enhance their security and power (realists) or fulfil the preferences of their populations (liberals).[12]

Different dispositions

A crucial question is whether there is more to the interests of states than security in the realist perspective or

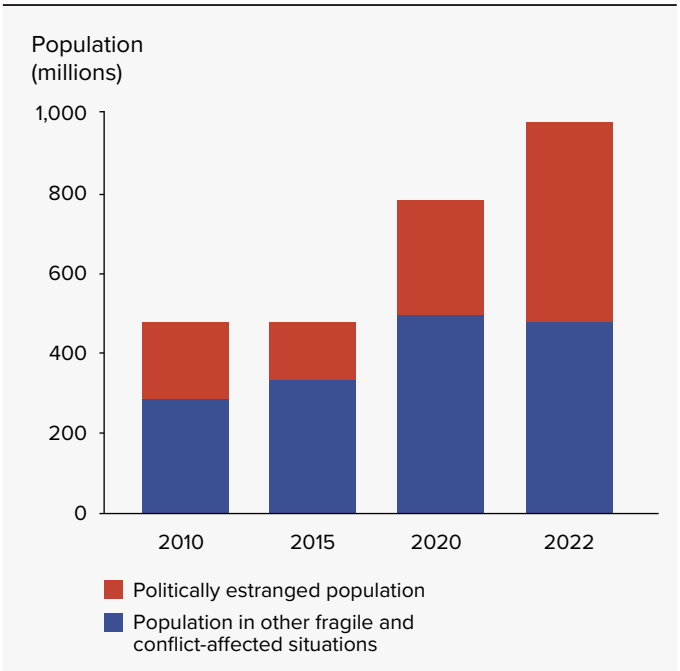
more than the aggregation of individual preferences in aggregated state preferences in liberalism. Many theories under either disposition say no.[13] Others allow for interests or preferences to be determined not only by objective material conditions but also by the social context that shapes states' understanding of their interests or preferences.[14] For instance, some realists hold that states seek both power and purpose (resulting from notions of national identity, a set of widely shared beliefs within a country that are not reducible to the aggregation of individual views) and that these two goals together shape the interests of states. And the liberal theory of democratic peace holds that countries that self-identify, and identify others, as liberal democracies tend not to go to war, premised on a socially constructed notion of shared identity and values.[15]

The salience of the different dispositions ebbs and flows depending on what is actually happening in the world.[16] The realist disposition provided a helpful framework during the Cold War but was less successful in explaining its (for the most part) peaceful end, with some authors declaring that we had reached the end of history by the early 1990s[17]—anathema for any realist. The great strides in international cooperation even during the Cold War—for instance, the eradication of smallpox or the Montreal Protocol, as discussed in chapter 4—can be better understood through a liberal view. With the ongoing geopolitical upheaval and heightened geopolitical tensions, the realist disposition is acquiring more salience, with not just the possibility but the reality of violent conflict across countries very much present.

It may appear that models of country behaviour dominated by interests and competition are the most appropriate to characterize the current context. Although different theories in international relations may also offer plausible accounts, staying with this view would suggest that the international order built in the aftermath of World War II—centred on multilateralism, economic openness and security cooperation—appears to be fraying amid a new cascade of wars,[18] as well as the greater protectionism and surge in populist politics around the world.[19] By this account, the potential fragmentation in the international system that appears to emerge today would derive from structural shifts as new countries and coalitions seek to gain power and influence, as well as to respond to perceived threats to their security.[20] In addition, the scale and complexity of today's global challenges might be creating new pressures on international institutions that were built for an altogether different era.

The current geopolitical context is thus characterized by uncertainty, insecurity and potential for greater fragmentation and disorder. This is further compounded by the fact that many people live in countries whose governments experience unconstitutional changes in power, internationally contested elections or are under major sanctions (figure S6.2.1). The behaviour of some of these countries in the international context may be harder to predict or interpret, with the potential for greater regional instability or even violent conflict. Moreover, in addition to states, new agents play a role in providing global public goods, not just multilateral organizations but other entities, from multinational firms to civil society and philanthropic organizations. While the establishment of new international organizations has declined sharply in the 21st century, transnational public–private governance initiatives have exploded.[21]

Figure S6.2.1 Half a billion people live in politically estranged situations, about five times more than in 2010



Note: Politically estranged situations refer to countries where relations between donors of official aid and national authorities are frayed or broken because of unconstitutional changes in government, internationally contested elections or major sanctions.
Source: Cliffe and others 2023.

NOTES

1. A recent international relations textbook, Dunne, Kurki and Smith (2021), includes chapters on classical realism, structural realism, liberalism, neoliberalism, the English School, Marxism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, normative international relations theory and green theory.
2. For a recent articulation of this perspective in its classical form, and its relevance in today's world in contrast with other perspectives, see Kirshner (2022), from which the description of the realism disposition in this spotlight is drawn.
3. This is the traditional definition of power proposed by Weber (2016), reartículated by Dahl (1957, pp. 202–203): "my intuitive idea of power, then, is something like this: A has power over B to the extent that he can bet B to do something that B would not otherwise do." For a review of other approaches to defining and conceptualizing power, see Guinote (2017).
4. This occurs when efforts taken by a state to increase its security are perceived by others as making them less secure, even if there is no aggressive intention on the part of the state enhancing its security.
5. Kirshner 2022, p. 16.
6. Acemoglu and Wolitzky 2023.
7. Moravcsik (1997), which forms the basis of the description of the liberal disposition in this paragraph.
8. Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner 1998.
9. Ruggie 1998.
10. Ruggie 1992.
11. Wendt 1992.
12. Finnemore and Sikkink 2001.
13. That is why the word "disposition" is used, given the multiple theories and variations that fit under each, in line with Kirshner (2022).
14. Checkel 1998.
15. Both examples are from Kirshner (2022).
16. Keohane 2020.
17. Fukuyama 1992.
18. Poast 2023.
19. Ikenberry 2018.
20. See Colgan and Keohane (2017), Ikenberry (2018), Jones and Malcorra (2020) and Shidore (2023).
21. Reinsberg and Westerwinter 2021, p. 73.

SPOTLIGHT 6.3

Geopolitics and the early history of the United Nations: Friend or foe?

Andrew Thompson, *Oxford University*

"The United Nations was not formed because nations were united." This is one way of explaining how the different countries of the world came together in San Francisco, California, in 1945 to discuss their common problems. Or, in the bleaker words of the second UN Secretary-General, the Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld, "the United Nations was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell."[1]

In truth, the United Nations has always been defined by geopolitics, not because it is simply or straightforwardly a creature of such but rather because geopolitics highlight its dual function sometimes to challenge and sometimes to uphold the geopolitical regime surrounding it. Put another way, the United Nations, throughout its history, has taken on tasks that states are unable or unwilling to; by the same token its ways of working reflect the rival conceptions of international cooperation latent within a prevailing state system.

What this means in practice is that the fledgling United Nations was animated as well as constrained by interstate rivalry and enabled as well as restricted by geopolitical change. Like many of the international organizations that either emerged from or expanded their remits after World War II, the United Nations was one of the makers—and not just the receivers—of the new global orders that sought to re-civilize Europe and to "make an old world new."

In a fundamental sense, the United Nations was unlike the League of Nations, which preceded it.[2] The fractured world order that emerged from World War I certainly led to changes in the international sphere: a raft of new regulatory agencies, an emergent discourse of protection for minority groups, and the rhetoric and reality of anticolonialism. But although the League of Nations held out the hope of a more international society, sharing liberal and democratic values with the interests of nations locked together, any such collective guardian of the peace required all sovereign states to sign up. This never happened.

After 1919 the world divided itself into different geopolitical zones, of which the membership of the League of Nations—anchored in Europe and practically coextensive with the British and French colonial systems beyond—was only one. The geopolitical realignments post-1945 were distinctive in two respects. First, the growth of global issues sped up markedly. Second, in championing a new global order, the United Nations was never to be captured by any single, major power bloc, however much the breakneck expansion of the United States meant that in this sphere, as in many others, US influence held a major sway.

The post–World War II global order was considerably more complex than that of the interwar era, notwithstanding the broadly bipolar equilibrium that eventually established itself. Many historians focus on the year 1945 as a sort of ground zero. Yet the decisive shifts happened later, with the gathering speed of decolonization, an intensifying Cold War and new forms of globalization. Despite attempts by European powers to retain control of their colonies, the 1950s demonstrated that old imperial models were fast losing traction. Cold War tensions between the capitalist and communist worlds were also heating up, and new regional configurations—including the Non-Aligned Movement—were emerging from a combination of the tectonics of empire on the one hand and superpower rivalry on the other.

So how do we characterize the state of postwar geopolitics, which the United Nations set about trying to tame? Before a breakpoint in about 1960, there was a US zone encompassing Latin America and much of the Pacific, except the western fringe and Korea, which were contested by China. Alongside the US zone was a UK zone, which extended over much of the Middle East until 1956; East, South and much of Central Africa; the Indian Ocean; and part of South East Asia. And there was a Soviet zone, which

included China until the Sino-Soviet split of 1955–1956 divided the communist world. Not until after 1960, just as the United Nations was experiencing a massive increase in membership, particularly of African members, did these geopolitical zones solidify. The US global reach was consolidated, the Soviet Union became more active in the "Third World" and, beyond that, there was the recovery of Germany and Japan.

This sounds like distinctly unpropitious territory for global governance—indeed, by 1970 the veto power of UN Security Council members had begun to be exercised more regularly, a sure sign of the economic woes and escalating political tensions that marked the rest of that decade. Yet at a time of accelerating globalization, however much the state depended on power, power no longer depended on the state. International organizations were not passive bystanders in the face of the geopolitical upheaval of the 1970s: the oil and debt crises, civil wars and frequent military coups, and the global struggle between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Warsaw Pact. Instead, they possessed power in their own right: the power to spotlight suffering and to make indifference a costly posture and the power to recognize new sovereignties and to make those sovereignties more recognizable.

The United Nations especially was coming of age. Carving out a more activist role for itself and seeking a wider meaning in world affairs, it implicitly, if not explicitly, challenged the state domination of the global political system. By arranging institutions correctly, UN civil servants—many of whom chose international over national politics—believed that they could better pursue collaborative solutions to the world's problems and better manage the consequences of increasing interdependency. The United Nations was in effect moving into territory previously occupied by nation-states; indeed, the weaker the system of interstate diplomacy, the more postwar international organizations were forced to assume the burdens of its lapses and failures. In this situation geopolitics was to take on a double significance—driving the calamities that put international organizations such as the United Nations in business yet also shaping the priorities for and the forms of international cooperation.

But to play an active part in world ordering required the United Nations to go far beyond anything the League of Nations had envisaged; the amalgam of functions it came to discharge grew to encompass peace and security, state-building and development, the proclamation and protection of basic human rights and the provision of emergency humanitarian relief. Different legal and institutional architectures developed around each of these functions, which made them seem more distinct than they actually were. The ways they played off each other can, however, be studied through the first generation of UN peacekeeping operations.[3]

In many ways the United Nations came of age, at least operationally, through its peacekeeping operations. Peacekeeping, as an instrument of conflict resolution, was closely identified with the United Nations. Because the United Nations did not have any of the built-in assets to act like a superpower, peacekeeping had a fundamentally self-restricting character: it was not intended to enforce the Security Council's collective will, which owing to the Cold War did not exist. Instead, UN peacekeeping, which relied on member states for personnel, supervised ceasefires, oversaw truces and interposed troops between warring parties.

Notwithstanding this self-restricting character, UN peacekeeping could not help but be affected by the power vacuums created by colonial disengagement. Nor could it sidestep the difficult question of the meaning of self-determination, at a time when the concept was elevated as an international norm, yet postcolonial states risked fracturing as a result of secessionist movements.

The aim of the initial operations was to place a buffer between belligerent parties, while ensuring host-state consent, the impartiality of UN forces and the use of force only as a last resort in self-defence. That all changed in Congo in 1960, when the United Nations adopted a far more expansive conception of peacekeeping.[4] Not only did the Congo crisis, as it was known at the time, transform the meaning of decolonization in Africa; it also transformed the fortunes of the United Nations. As the Belgians abruptly withdrew, leaving chaos and catastrophe behind, and East and West competed for African allegiance, the United Nations embarked on an unprecedented operation—a four-year mission, deploying a multinational force of almost 20,000 (predominantly African) troops to restore the unity of the country and

enable the newly independent government to function. For the first time in UN peacekeeping, Ethiopian, Indian, Irish and Swedish forces, under the organization's control, were authorized to use offensive force to bring an end to the secession of the resource-rich province of Katanga.

What was arguably the most controversial UN peacekeeping operation—prior to those in the 1990s—led to multiple tragedies: the death of Hammarskjöld, when his plane crashed in Northern Rhodesia (present-day Zambia) on a mission to bring peace to the Congo, in circumstances that some continue to suspect involved foul play; a major international human rights controversy about violations committed by UN forces; and the United Nations teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, with peacekeeping having cost a staggering $10 million a month (over $100 million in today's dollars).

Like so many other postwar conflicts that the United Nations had to decide whether to insert itself into, the Congo crisis was internationalized from the very start. Paradoxically, peacekeeping had curbed neocolonial and Cold War involvement in Africa while becoming a focus of that involvement. The "muscular action" mandated by the Security Council prevented the breakup of Congo and was assessed positively at the time as a result. Yet the morphing of defensive peacekeeping into offensive fighting plunged the United Nations into crisis, painfully revealing the limits of the Hammarskjöld model: enforcement was rapidly abandoned in favour of observation and interposition.

Despite this negative military verdict, for Hammarskjöld security was never an end in itself but a necessary precondition for providing a structure that might hold Congo together. If anything, the Secretary-General saw the long-term contribution of the United Nations as lying more in the civilian field, comprising a complex state-building programme (setting up and running a parallel administration) and an equally complex relief operation (particularly to prevent the total collapse of the Congolese health system). Expelling Belgian mercenaries and defeating the Katangese secessionists were simply stepping stones towards these greater goals.

Understanding postwar peacekeeping operations is historically instructive: it reveals how the United Nations struggled to manage decolonization and to serve as a bridge between East and West during the Cold War. The legacy of that peacekeeping is also important for how the United Nations conceives of itself today. What postwar peacekeeping shows (even when it backfires) is that the United Nations possesses power—not only to declare a crisis but, crucially, to define the nature of the crisis to which it responds.

In declaring the Congo crisis, the United Nations positioned itself as the prime responder—thereby providing the institutional matrix into which other international organizations, such as the Red Cross, had to accommodate themselves. In defining the Congo crisis, the United Nations went further—to set out exactly what type of response was called for. If those who recognize a crisis possess the power to intervene, those who construct a crisis can similarly go a long way to determine how it should be managed.[5]

This question of crisis ordering, of what gets linked to what and why, is no less pertinent to today's geopolitics, an age of polycrisis in which global shocks are deeply interconnected. International norms are increasingly disregarded, not just in Ukraine and Gaza but in more than 100 armed conflicts, only some of which make the headlines. In the 21st century geopolitical rifting is complicated by a global environmental crisis that is escalating humanitarian needs and threatening the gains made in world poverty reduction and human development over the last quarter century.

Our capacity to cope, therefore, rests on recognizing that climate and conflict now often go hand in hand, with climate change set to become a risk multiplier for tomorrow's conflicts as well as an additional complication for existing ones. The greatest complications nevertheless remain geopolitical. However much human activity is the dominant force shaping our planet, considerations of territorial security are repeatedly trumping human security. As extreme weather events multiply, tackling the negative impacts of climate change will mean creating clearer pathways to intervention amid a rising tide of populism and intensifying polarization. New paths must be explored and creative methods given a chance.

Geographical representation and the power of engagement will be key considerations in any reform process, especially if the fundamental imbalances and historical injustices in the current global order are to be addressed. Much will hinge on the ability—and

agility—of the United Nations to reinvigorate a post-war institutional architecture, now nearly 80 years old, and to close the gap between what multilateral institutions are expected to do and what they are capable of doing. Only by closing that gap, and adopting more radically inclusive approaches to problem-solving, will faith in multilateralism be enhanced and effective global cooperation improved. As the early history of the United Nations reveals, this is emphatically not the first time the organization has faced a geopolitical challenge of this scale, complexity or urgency.

NOTES

The author is grateful to Mr. Adama Dieng, former Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General for the Prevention of Genocide, for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this spotlight.

1. Hammarskjöld 1954.
2. For the comparison, see Darwin (2007).
3. See, especially, MacQueen (2014).
4. For a new account of the UN Congo operation, relating the military to the civilian aspects of peacekeeping, see Thompson (forthcoming).
5. For crisis declaration and definition, and the part each played in constructing new world orders, see the Changing Global Orders project, funded by the Oxford Martin School, of which the author is one of the four directors https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/changing-global-orders/ (accessed 24 January 2024).

SPOTLIGHT 6.4

(Mis)perceiving others

Leonardo Bursztyn, *University of Chicago*

Most people are influenced by others when making important decisions or when forming opinions. Perceptions about others should play a key role in these contexts. Indeed, people are influenced by what they think others think or do. But what if people misperceive others? If these misperceptions are common, many people might be making decisions based on incorrect information. More than that, important behaviours could then conceivably be changed by simply recalibrating people's beliefs about others.

This spotlight begins by examining misperceptions about gender norms. The conclusion is clear: misperceptions about gender norms are globally ubiquitous, and simple information provision could lead to improvements in women's labour market participation. The spotlight then summarizes a meta-analysis of the recent literature on misperceptions that concludes that misperceptions about others are widespread, asymmetric and much larger when about outgroup members. Moreover, experimental treatments to recalibrate misperceptions generally work as intended and often lead to important changes in behaviours. So, interventions correcting misperceptions could build empathy and cooperation across groups and reduce conflict and hostility.

Misperceived gender norms: Global evidence

A newly designed module from Gallup World Poll examines actual and perceived gender norms using nationally representative samples from 60 countries, which together cover more than 80 percent of the world population.[1] One aspect of gender norms examined is how people view whether women should be allowed to work outside the home and how people perceive others' views on the topic. The patterns are striking: in every single country examined the (often overwhelming) majority of people support the idea of women working outside the home. And in every single country, people underestimate the level of support by others.

The next question that comes to mind is whether gender norms are themselves the anomaly in terms of the accuracy of perceptions: perhaps people particularly misperceive others' opinions in this domain but not in other contexts. The results from a recent meta-analysis of the literature help answer this question.

Misperceptions about others across settings

A detailed review of 81 papers published across the social sciences over the past 20 years measures perceptions about others across a wide range of contexts.[2] The picture is clear: across societies individuals widely misperceive what others think, what others do and even who others are. These misperceptions cover a variety of topics, from beliefs about the size of immigrant populations to perceptions of partisans' political opinions to perceptions of the vaccination behaviours of others in a community. The analysis yields a few key stylized facts.

- Misperceptions about others prevail in various domains and are not simply due to measurement error. Assessing misperceptions requires eliciting perceptions about others and knowing the corresponding truth. For example, perceptions of a population's racial composition can be compared with an objective truth—that is, the population shares of each racial group, as reported in census data. For perceptions of other people's opinions about a topic, the truth refers to the relevant population's reported views (for example, their average level).
- Misperceptions about others tend to be asymmetric, with beliefs leaning heavily to one side when compared with reality. The asymmetry of misperceptions is the ratio of respondents on one side of the truth to those on the opposite side. In this definition the higher number always acts as

the numerator, regardless of whether beliefs are under- or overestimations of reality. Therefore, a ratio of 1 signifies a perfect balance, and a higher ratio indicates a more pronounced imbalance. Misperceptions about others typically tilt one way, and the tilt is large.

- Misperceptions about ingroup members are markedly less pronounced than those about outgroup members. In more than half the studied areas, most respondents have more accurate perceptions about their ingroup than about outgroup members. Additionally, perceptions about outgroup members tend to exhibit greater spread across respondents than those about ingroup members. This indicates that views about ingroup members are not only more precise on average but also more consistently aligned with reality. Moreover, perceptions of ingroup members are more symmetrically distributed around the truth than those about outgroup members.
- One's own attitudes and beliefs are strongly, positively correlated with misperceptions about others' attitudes and beliefs on the same issues. Moreover, respondents tend to think that other ingroup members share their characteristics, attitudes, beliefs or behaviours, while those in the outgroups are the opposite of themselves.

Does information provision aimed at correcting misperceptions work? Does it lead to behavioural changes? The answer is that these interventions are generally effective—but there are some nuances in the findings.[3] Interventions that are more qualitative and narrative, such as those that involve anecdotes, vignettes and storytelling, tend to have larger effects in correcting misperceptions. However, while some treatments lead to large changes in behaviours, large changes often occur only in studies that examine behavioural adjustments shortly after the interventions, suggesting a potential rigidity in the mapping between misperceptions and some behaviours: even though beliefs may have changed, the deeper underlying drivers of behaviour may not have. The findings mirror other recent work suggesting that qualitative and narrative-driven interventions may be particularly effective and may have longer lasting effects.[4] Understanding the most effective ways to correct misperceptions and generate long-lasting behavioural changes is an important avenue for future research—and one that could have meaningful policy implications.

Another, more conceptual path for future work involves better understanding the general forces that lead to persistent misperceptions. The origin, rigidity and persistence of misperceptions about others can in principle be explained by different conceptual frameworks, such as stereotyping,[5] motivated reasoning[6] and pluralistic ignorance.[7] But most existing study designs cannot disentangle the role of these different models. Enhancing understanding of the role of these mechanisms would allow for better policy design.

A final area for consideration is how to think of welfare in contexts of widespread misperceptions. One such normative consideration—out of the scope of the existing literature—is to examine whether informing people about the true state of the world to correct their perceptions is something that is always desirable. It is understood that many authoritarian regimes may maintain their political control by directly manipulating citizens' perceptions of each other.[8] In such contexts, would interventions that correct some perceptions about others expand political rights and freedom to more people around the world? To the extent that misperception might be self-fulfilling, can policy be designed to engineer misperceptions that lead to more socially desirable outcomes (as in the contexts of racial tolerance and gender equality)?

Lessons for building intergroup cooperation and reducing hostility

People tend to have much larger misperceptions about outgroup members than about ingroup members. In many cases these misperceptions exaggerate perceived differences across groups, as for Democrats and Republicans in the United States.[9] Such a phenomenon may not be surprising, given the growing focus on an us versus them mentality by the media and politicians. One potential implication relates to a long-standing hypothesis in social psychology that perceived similarity is a key input for someone to feel empathy towards outgroups. Information provision and intergroup contact can lead to an increase in perceived similarity with outgroups, which in turn generates greater altruism and empathy towards those

groups.[10] Correcting misperceptions about outgroups thus has the potential to reduce hostility and increase cooperation and altruism—an important outcome in a world increasingly divided and polarized.

Across societies and across domains, people widely misperceive what others think, what others do and even who others are. The body of work reviewed here indicates that in many important contexts changes in behaviours and attitudes might be achieved with simple and cost-effective policy interventions through information provision in the form of statistics, vignettes, anecdotes or narratives.

NOTES

1. Bursztyn and others 2023. This work extends findings from Saudi Arabia, where the vast majority of young married men privately support women working outside of home but incorrectly believe that the majority of other men (including their own neighbours) oppose it (Bursztyn, González and Yanagizawa-Drott 2020).
2. Bursztyn and Yang 2022.
3. Bursztyn and Yang 2022.
4. Graeber, Roth and Zimmermann 2023.
5. Bordalo and others 2016.
6. Bénabou and Tirole 2016.
7. Bursztyn, Egorov and Fiorin 2020; Bursztyn, González and Yanagizawa-Drott 2020; Kuran 1997.
8. Kuran 1997.
9. Bordalo, Gennaioli and Shleifer 2022; Bordalo, Tabellini and Yang 2020.
10. Andries and others 2024.