Ideological Empathy: Disarming the Landmines of Left-Right Conflict in the U.S.

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Overview

In this book, I build a case that *ideological empathy* needs to be one of the tools for combatting party polarization in the United States. Ideological empathy is, in short, my term for what Mutz (2006) calls "hearing the other side." When encountering an ideology or worldview one does not share, can a person interpret that view in a neutral or generous fashion? For instance, if a conservative commentator says that gun restrictions will not reduce mass shootings, one could interpret this negatively by saying the commentator has been brainwashed by the National Rifle Association. By contrast, a more generous interpretation would be that the commentator believes mass shootings are committed by "bad people," who are going to find ways to commit mass harm regardless of the gun laws. This empathy for others' views is valued in theories of deliberative democracy (Habermas 1998; see Mutz 2006; Carlson and Settle 2022), but many also argue that such empathy can be naïve in competitive politics (see Jost 2021).

Can increases in ideological empathy reduce polarization (reduce anger and slow democratic backsliding) in the United States? I argue that in the public, conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats have incomplete and ungenerous understandings of the other's ideology, and do not fully understand the other group's moral triggers (what I call the *landmines* of political discourse). Mutual triggering of these landmines helps escalate a cycle of democratic norm violations, which needs to be disarmed.

However, there is a key challenge for my argument; much of the existing literature concludes that polarization in the public is not an ideological phenomenon. Three common premises in the literature are particularly challenging:

1. The public is not very ideological, and is not ideologically polarized (i.e., is not divided in its views of substantive government policy) (i.e., Fiorina et al. 2004).
2. Affective polarization, Democrats' and Republicans' dislike for one another, is not grounded in true ideological disagreement (i.e., Iyengar et al. 2012).
3. Since affective polarization stems largely from exaggerated misperceptions about the other party's extremity, it can be ameliorated by reminding Democrats and Republicans they have more in common than they think (i.e., Voelkel et al. 2023; Levendusky 2023).

With a series of new studies, I revaluate each of these premises, drawing from a theory of ideology (largely stemming from social psychology) where liberals and conservatives hold different views of danger and human nature (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1981; Duckitt 2001; Jost et al. 2003; Graham et al. 2009; Hibbing et al. 2014). Conservatives believe that human nature is bad, and that managing danger requires constricting humans' worst impulses. Liberals believe that human nature is good, and that it is possible to manage danger by creating a world that works for everyone. This theory helps explain why ideology is indeed an important facet of the polarization problem. Furthermore, the key to engendering empathy is for liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans to better understand the other's view of danger. In other words, misunderstandings over danger are the source of the *landmines.* But if both sides see how the other views danger, then the landmines can be disarmed.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Landmines and the Anatomy of a Political Conversation
In a short film called *Purple: America, We Need to Talk,* the non-profit organization Resetting the Table leads a workshop in contentious political conversations, for regular Americans in rural Wisconsin and Iowa. During one scene, the discussion moderator prompts the participants to share their views on the social safety net. Ted, a retired firefighter, says, "Some people, who are really in need, you feel compassion for them. But other people who just milk the system for all it's worth, I don't think it's right." After a few others weigh in, AJ, a campus diversity coordinator, says, "I don't think our government does enough for the people that live in this country," and in her elaboration she says that the country was built on stolen land and the backs of slaves.

I was not in the room for this discussion, but my interpretation is that both Ted and AJ set off *landmines*, triggering the other's moral concerns and ensuring that the unfolding conversation would be contentious. Both of them likely believed that their statements were plain common sense. Furthermore, I would bet that neither would be able to articulate – in a generous fashion – what the other found upsetting about their view. That is what I want to change with this book.

In Chapter 1, I use transcripts of online chatroom discussions between Democrats and Republicans to provide further examples what it looks like to set off a landmine in political discussion. That is, I illustrate how discussions unfold when at least one discussion participant (often unknowingly) triggers the moral concerns of another participant. Furthermore, after introducing the *danger framework* of ideology (and providing background on the social psychology literature from which it comes), I then use this framework to explain the moral concerns that were likely set off during the conversations.

For instance, in the danger framework, conservatives tend to care more than liberals about systems being exploited by perceived cheaters and free riders. Since human nature is generally bad, it is actually foolish in this view to assume that people writ large are trustworthy. So government systems like the social safety net need to be constructed with this virtue in mind. This appears to be how Ted was thinking when he expressed concern over people who "just milk the system for all it's worth." However, in the liberal perspective, this concern is backwards. Liberals, who view human nature more positively, place a high value on equality between different groups. In particular, they tend to be concerned about the rights of groups that were historically exploited in society. So when AJ hears Ted talk about people who milk the system, she is likely to interpret this a prejudiced remark against the poor or against black people. This is also likely why in her remarks she talks about stolen land and slavery.

If we strip away much of the political science theory, the simplest statement of my inquiry is this: can Ted and AJ (and people with all views in between) be coached to see the positive rationale for the other's views? Rather than simply stating their existing opinions and then arguing, can more understanding of the other's perspective lead to more cooperation and consensus-building? And can such empathy be scaled up to have larger benefits for democracy?

Chapter 2: The Polarization Literature
In the Chapter 1, I make several assumptions about the conversation that unfolded between Ted and AJ, and the reasons for their beliefs and behavior. Are these assumptions correct? Many scholars of party polarization could take issue with my account. While this literature is large, I

posit that there is consensus story around ideology and polarization that has become common in the literature. It is characterized by three claims:
1. The public is not very ideological;
2. Affective polarization is not grounded in true ideological disagreement;
3. Affective polarization can be ameliorated by reminding Democrats and Republicans they have more in common than they think.

In this chapter, I briefly outline the evidence for these claims. Then, in the next three chapters, I reinterpret the claims based on my own original studies.

Chapter 3: Ideology in the Public
The ideology literature is complicated, so in Chapter 3, I focus on a narrow question about ideology: is the public ideologically polarized? My answer is, it depends what survey questions you ask them. Many of the studies claiming there is little polarization use one of two ways of selecting survey questions. An agnostic approach selects a handful of survey questions that are intended to cover a broad array of political conflict. And an economic-social approach selects questions according to an economic and social dimension. I develop an original survey (fielded in 2022), and start by incorporating questions from two existing studies, representative of the agnostic and economic-social approach. I then use the danger framework of ideology to determine what's missing from the initial set of items, and accordingly add appropriate items. I find that many of the newly added questions about danger do indeed generate liberal-conservative polarization. For instance, the public may not be polarized on specific economic policies, but I do find evidence they are polarized on a variety of new questions, including: whether gun restrictions disadvantage the law abiding (because there are bad people who will get guns anyway); whether gun restrictions are a good way to reduce mass shootings; tough immigration security policy that includes a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border; whether illegal immigration should be treated like a crime; whether society works best when we take care of our own first; punishment for rule-breakers; or whether new lifestyles are breaking down society.

Chapter 4: The Ideological Component of Affective Polarization
One common measure of affective polarization has partisans rate each other on a variety of negative traits (ignorant, hypocritical, selfish), and scholars posit that this is partisan, not ideological, behavior (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012). That is, partisans assign positive traits to their own party and negative traits to the other, and the specific traits do not matter. Alternatively, I posit that negative trait assignments conceal a variety of specific criticisms which reflect ideological viewpoints. For instance, Democrats say that Republicans are easily manipulated by politicians who capitalize on their fears, which is often a liberal way of critiquing hawkish, conservative security policy. Republicans say that Democrats should stop apologizing on behalf of the United States, which is a conservative way of critiquing liberal diplomatic efforts. I ran online surveys (in 2023 and 2025) asking partisans about values, trait ratings, and sixteen of these specific, ideological critiques. The 2025 survey also contained a placebo experiment where the party label in the criticism is randomly assigned. I find evidence of an ideological asymmetry – endorsement of the real criticisms is higher than endorsement of the placebo criticisms. For instance, more Republicans endorse, "Democrats always make themselves the victim" than Democrats endorse, "Republicans always make themselves the victim." This provides evidence that individuals hold a variety of ideological reasons for disliking the other party.

Furthermore, in multiple surveys, I ask a variety of open-ended questions about why individuals dislike the other party. The results reveal ideological content that would be invisible in typical closed-ended questions about disliking the other party. **(See Appendix Tables)**.

Chapter 5: Landmines and the Arms Race over Democracy
The main argument of this book is that when liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans trigger each other's landmines, this escalates a cycle of democratic norm violations. The full argument is a bit more complicated. Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans both have a set of issue priorities they view with high levels of *urgency* (a feeling that the issues need to be addressed immediately to avoid dire consequences) and *grievance* (a feeling that the other party/ideological coalition is obstructive to their goals). Urgency and grievance provide the pretense for violating democratic norms, especially when such norm violations can forward the urgent policy priorities (which will otherwise languish). Chapters 3 and 4 provided evidence of both the urgency and the grievance. A *landmine* is when one group cannot understand the moral concern of the other, because they do not understand the group's full ideology. For instance, many liberals do not understand why conservatives would perceive that guns increase (rather than decrease) safety. When one group tramples over another's landmine, this can magnify the latter group's sense of grievance, thus escalating the cycle of norms violations.

In this chapter, I look at measures of urgency and grievance (including measures from previous chapters and new measures), and investigate their relationship with support for democratic norms. Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans become willing to support norm violations when it is clear how the violation helps address an urgent policy goal. After putting forward this model of a cycle of escalating norm violations, I can argue why ideological empathy is a necessary intervention. In many ways, the cycle is structural, and it cannot be de-escalated easily. But the triggering of landmines in political discourse adds insult to injury. If liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans better understood each other's beliefs, they could avoid these blunders, and perhaps even find new ways to build some consensus and de-escalate.

Chapter 6: Conclusion
In this chapter, I will outline implications for future research, address objections, and discuss practical implications. The most important objection is that many will ask whether both parties are equally responsible for escalations in democratic norms. I agree there is a strong case to be made that the Republican party is asymmetrically contributing to the stress on democratic norms, and in this chapter I will outline relevant evidence. My point is not that Democrats should be "playing nice" in every scenario, and there will be critical junctures when they absolutely should not play nice. But over the long run, my main point is that democracy can benefit from an increased dosage of ideological empathy. And this is something I argue both parties / ideological coalitions need to contribute to. In the chapter, I will elaborate how I balance these competing considerations.

Literature, Market, and Audience
The book seeks to interact with several related streams of debate. Fiorina and colleagues argued as far back as 2004 (i.e., Fiorina et al. 2004) that common public narratives about polarization were exaggerated. The story that the U.S. was divided into red America and blue America, they

said, was not true. This stance has been highly influential, and is (explicitly and implicitly) the starting point for the three premises in the Overview that I seek to challenge. Political scientists are right to challenge the broad claims that are often made in public about polarization, to demand more precision in the way we talk about it, and to demand more measurement to back up particular claims. But I am concerned that the political science narrative has overcorrected. The escalating cycle of norm violations I propose in the book is intended to make a renewed case, with the appropriate level of precision in measurement, that ideological polarization does create challenges for U.S. democracy.

Stemming largely from the claims made by Fiorina et al. (2004), there has also been considerable energy in the field around interventions that reduce affective polarization by reminding partisans how much they have in common (see Levendusky 2023 and several interventions in Voelkel et al. 2023). I worry these interventions depend too much on the premise that ideological polarization is an exaggeration or a misunderstanding. My premise of ideological landmines, and ideological empathy to disarm the landmines, is an alternative narrative. Based on the evidence, I do expect the existing interventions can help by lowering peoples' psychological defenses and opening the door for more cross-party conversation. But I propose that ideological empathy is needed to address a more structural cycle, by which the landmines lead to escalations in norm violations.

By suggesting the need for ideological empathy, and following, suggesting that liberal Democrats should try to understand conservative Republicans, the book is also engaging with a debate about Donald Trump's supporters. For instance, the *New York Times* columnist Roxanne Gay in November, 2024 said that "Mr. Trump's voters are granted a level of care and coddling that defies credulity."[1] My call for empathy is not an endorsement of coddling. I want to generate more discourse where, on both the left and right, peoples' first reaction to others' views are generous (i.e., a glass half full attitude) instead of reactionary. The left and right, or Democrats and Republicans, do not have to like each other. But there are benefits, I propose, to generosity and empathy.

My particular proposed antidote (ideological empathy) draws considerably from the approaches to political discourse suggested by Lakoff (1996), Mutz (2006), and Haidt (2012). Each of these authors makes an argument for more empathy, but many readers may walk away from those books wanting more concrete examples of what empathy looks like. My research agenda has not reached the stage where it can be a "how-to" manual for interested readers. But through the examples and data points I choose (such as the guns examples throughout this document), I want readers to encounter particular instances when they learn something new about the ideology they do not hold.

In short, the book is directed at both academic and non-academic audiences. Because the underlying research and data collection has concerned technical debates around polarization, it would be difficult at this stage to write a version that is fully directed at the general public. For this reason, the academic audience, as well as university undergraduates, are likely the ideal audiences.

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[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/17/opinion/america-trump-tolerance.html

Appendix: Example Open-Ended Responses for Chapter 4

Table: Sample open-ended responses to prompt about outparty traits
Republicans claim to be pro-life, yet once a fetus is born as an infant they do not care what happens - pro-birth is what they actually are. They don't care about feeding, housing, educating, or providing anything to the child once it is born, and they certainly do not care about the life or quality of life of the mother/father/parents.
[Republicans'] stance on abortion is very hypocritical. Republicans claim that babies deserve life, yet when there is a school shooting, immigrants are killed, civilians are murdered by police, they change their stance.
[Democrats] say you need to get the vaccine for other people. But when it comes to abortion it's "my body my choice."
[Democrats] saying that all lives matter but then abortion is OK. Saying our body our choice when you want to justify murdering baby in womb but it is not OK to say no to a vaccine not fully tested.
Republicans say they want freedom from government oppression but they also want to control women's rights to bodily autonomy.
In my opinion [Republicans] are hypocritical about things such as women's rights for us to have control over our own bodies.
The hypocrisy lies in [Republicans'] claims to be patriotic but constantly support causes that cause more harm than good to the country (i.e., their stance on abortion. A young woman was ordered to give birth to a baby because she was too immature to handle an abortion!).
Sometimes [Democrats] tend to trash American in the world. Seem to care more what other countries think thank than citizen of our country.
Democrats are hypocritical because they want to save Ukraine's border while disregarding America's border and sovereignty.
[Democrats] like to spend taxpayers' money foolishly by helping every other country and can't take care of their own people in this country.
[Republicans are] so worried about pedophilic drag queens, a practically nonexistent issue, and ignore the very real pedophile problem in their churches.
Conservatives say they care about humanity and the well being of its people, but it's hypocritical as they support guns and don't support public funding for medical care and social programs.
Selfish: [Democrats] wanting "sanctuary" cities to house immigrants, but also having a quick change of mind when it's their cities also taking in immigrants.
Hypocritical: Successful Democrats/liberals will claim to love diversity, but will live in majority or nearly-all white enclaves.
This table provides a sample of responses to an open-ended prompt asking participants to provide an example of the outparty embodying a negative trait (e.g., hypocritical, selfish, not patriotic, not intelligent, or not open-minded). From 2023 survey (Bovitz, n = 303).

Table: Examples of reasons for other group's gun views	
Respondent Ideology	Response
Liberal	They want to have weapons available for themselves.
Liberal	Maybe there are more conservatives in states that encourage a lot of hunting. Maybe the gun lobby has had an influence
Liberal	They have a basic Fear of losing the right to bear arms.
Liberal	For multiple reasons, I would say the primary reason is that much of conservatism is based on fear, and how they can protect themselves from change and things that they fear
Liberal	I personally believe a lot of conservatives overreach when it comes to gun culture because it's infused in their lifestyle. They feel like liberals want to take away their rights.

Liberal	They feel like their freedoms are being taken away, they feel like they need to protect themselves.
Liberal	They believe they are having their rights taken away.
Liberal	I think they believe in opposing these regulations because they don't want the so-called "government control" over their lives and use the 2nd Amendment as a method of reason for them
Liberal	Because of being brainwashed into thinking their civil liberties are being violated by imposing gun restrictions
Conservative	Because they want people to not own any guns. They also want to sacrifice their freedoms for security provided by the government which is wrong.
Conservative	I think that the liberals just like the control it offers.
Conservative	They believe that a greater power (government) needs to regular behavior. They believe in putting bandaids vs going to the root of the problem. It also removes a lot responsibility from fixing the problem at the familial scale. Radicalization from both sides and the degeneration of society has created an environment that creates deep and encroaching issues that damage the mental health of our progeny.
Conservative	Liberals believe that more rules and control will limit who can get their hands on a gun
Conservative	They tend to think back ground checks don't really already happen
Conservative	Most of them don't even know how a gun works, have never fired one and only know what the tv tells them.
Conservative	I believe they are all brain washed by social media and major news
Conservative	They want a society that has more control. They care about taking guns away instead of addressing root causes of mental health.
Moderate	[Liberals] tend to say they care more about human life than constitutional rights. This can be seen as hypocrisy though, when concerning other issues, like abortion vs bodily autonomy.
Bovitz, 2024 survey	

Table: Example of questions respondent would ask other group about guns

Respondent Ideology	Response
Liberal	Would [you] like living in a society where everyone is armed?
Liberal	Why do you think that it is okay to own an assault rifle? Why do you need one?

Liberal	You belong to the self proclaimed party of law and order. Why do you support the legalization of assault rifles that can easily pierce the protection that our police officers have available to them? Do you believe that the founding fathers had the slightest idea of what our guns of today would be capable of? If so, why do you think that they would think that it would lead to a healthy society for us all to be able to own weapons of war?
Liberal	How many times in your personal life have you felt threatened enough that you needed a gun?
Liberal	To specific conservatives, why do you feel like you need a gun, or more specifically, multiple?
Liberal	Why so hell bent against background checks
Liberal	As a future gun owner myself, is it okay if I just have one? I don't see the need for multiple guns unless you have a huge house. Also, out of all guns, why are you so adamant on getting assault rifles? They're meant to kill multiple people in a short amount of time. Do you think you will be raided by like 10 people at once?
Liberal	Would you really feel safe with the other half of the country carrying guns among you and your loved ones? As you claim "mental health" to be the key to the atrocities we see today, who and what will determine who is fit to carry and who is not?
Conservative	What about the abortions that kill many more children than the school shootings?
Conservative	How can you be for reproductive freedoms but not the freedom to bear arms? In your own words can you provide me with a detailed explanation as to how more regulations will prevent gun deaths?
Conservative	If guns don't kill people, who does? Well the answer is pretty simple as a matter of fact. PEOPLE kill people. The gun is only a tool used to accomplish this feat, as could be a knife or a vehicle or a deadly cocktail of prescription drugs. Why are then should we ban guns? If we do why not make vehicles also illegal while we're at it?
Conservative	Are the lives lost to gun violence in cities like Chicago matter to you like those lost in public/school shootings? Do you believe that we have a right to defend ourselves, whether that be a non-lethal or lethal weapon?
Conservative	Home invasions. How will him control stop them?
Conservative	What is an assault rifle?
Conservative	Have you ever fired a gun? Have you ever been to a gun range? Have you ever been to a gun safety class?
Conservative	Why do you want to take guns away from good people and make it harder to protect us from bad people?

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