Research Statement
I study American politics and political behavior, with interests in public opinion, ideology, values, affective polarization, regular political talk, policy issue attitudes, and motivated reasoning. My research overall concerns ideological empathy, which I am defining as individuals' propensity to encounter views of the world they do not share, and approach such viewpoints neutrally or generously instead of negatively. Do regular people engage in ideological empathy, and to what extent? What are the consequences for regular political talk, affective polarization, and democratic stability? I am developing my research conducted so far into a book, for which the working title is *Ideological Empathy: Disarming the Landmines of Left-Right Conflict in the U.S.* Through a series of original studies, I argue that the U.S. public is more ideological than the existing literature suggests. Furthermore, 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 (the landmines). Mutual triggering of these landmines helps escalate a cycle of democratic norm violations, which needs to be disarmed. Throughout, I draw heavily from a model of ideology (which stems from the social psychology literature) where liberals and conservatives hold different views of human nature and a dangerous world. I also argue that the key for engendering empathy is for both groups to better understand the other's view of danger. I expect this work to set the stage for a robust long-term research agenda.

Ideological Empathy and Party Polarization
Ideological empathy is, in essence, my term for what Mutz (2006) calls "hearing the other side." Conditional on 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. Ideological empathy (or lack of it) is similar to the concept of motivated reasoning (i.e., Taber and Lodge 2006), except it more narrowly concerns *the explanations* that one person generates for another person's stated positions. 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).

       In my book project, I argue that ideological empathy is needed to slow a cycle of escalating democratic norm violations in the U.S. A key challenge for developing this argument was that much of the existing literature concludes that polarization in the public is not an ideological phenomenon. In three studies, I address this challenge by: 1.) reinvestigating the premise that the public is not ideological (i.e., Converse 1964); 2.) proposing that substantive, ideological disagreement contributes meaningfully to party animosity (in contrast to other scholars, e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012); and 3.) proposing that ideological empathy is needed to reduce animosity and backsliding. In each of the three studies, I draw from a framework of ideology from social psychology, which posits that liberals and conservatives hold fundamentally 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 hold a more negative view of human nature, and think that managing the world's dangers requires constraining this bad human nature (such as through religion that constrains internal

impulses, or hawkish foreign policy that deters hostile enemies). Liberals view human nature more positively, and through egalitarianism, religious tolerance, and diplomacy, manage danger by trying to create a world that works for everyone.

The first study in the project reinvestigates Converse's (1964) notion that the public is not ideologically constrained – that is, few in the public hold ideological belief systems that are consistently liberal or consistently conservative. The innovation of this study was to illustrate that when other analyses (mostly in political science) measure constraint, they use relatively "thin" frameworks of ideology that leave too much out. I developed an original (online) survey and started by including survey items from two analyses representative of this thin approach. I then used the danger framework to determine what was missing from the initial, thin set of items. For instance, since the thin framework defines ideology largely in terms of an economic and social dimension, I added a considerable number of survey items concerning domestic and foreign security to make up for the gap. Furthermore, I wrote a variety of new survey items that highlight the "danger-based" dispute theoretically at the heart of a variety of policy issues (e.g., disagree/agree, "Gun restrictions put the law-abiding at a disadvantage because there are always bad people who will get guns anyway," which I adapted from the prose of Hetherington and Weiler 2018).

I find "pockets" of group-level constraint (areas of high agreement for liberals or high agreement for conservatives) that would not have been detectable with the old survey items alone. In the cluster of the top fourteen conservative items, the percent of conservatives holding the same position ranges from 74% to 88% per item, while for the top fourteen liberal items, the percent of liberals supporting the same position ranges from 84% to 94%. This result does not overturn Converse – individual belief systems can still be highly mixed. But at the same time, these areas of high agreement among liberals and among conservatives should not be ignored. The manuscript for this study is currently under revision for submission to a new journal.

In the project's second study, I explore the relationship between ideology and party animosity by directly investigating the negative things that partisans say about each other. The original manuscript for this study received a *reject and resubmit* from *Political Behavior*, and in August 2025 I collected data on a new survey as requested by the journal. One common measure of party animosity 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 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.

In the third study for this project, I began development for an intervention to induce ideological empathy. Stemming from the premise that animosity is not ideological, many existing interventions for reducing party animosity *emphasize commonalities* between the parties, by correcting misperceptions about outparty extremity (e.g., Ahler and Sood 2018; see also Voelkel et al. 2023) or emphasizing common identities (i.e., American identity, Levendusky 2018). By contrast, my intervention was intended to help liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans *understand their substantive differences*. An intervention prompt in an online, small-sample pilot experiment used the danger framework of ideology to explain to respondents why liberals and conservatives view guns differently. Due to the pilot results, I determined further theoretical development is necessary before testing more interventions.

As a follow-up to the initial research, I have begun a study aimed at tying ideological empathy to democratic stability. In other words, the study is intended to bolster the last link in my argument – ideological empathy is necessary to slow democratic erosion. The negative criticisms in Study 2 are examples of the ungenerous views liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans hold toward one another, and both Study 1 and Study 2 provide evidence of moral concerns (the triggers or "landmines") that are held by one side but not the other. I argue that ungenerous views and mutual triggering both help individuals justify their view that the other group is a bad-faith negotiating partner. This, in turn, helps them justify support for (and/or lack of punishment toward elites for) escalating democratic norm violations. The book will use all the data mentioned so far, with an emphasis on highlighting the narrative between studies. I plan to also add qualitative analysis of online chat-room transcripts between Democrats and Republicans, to illustrate what it looks like when one person unknowingly triggers a discussion partner's "landmine."

Future Work on Ideological Empathy

My initial work lays the foundation for a robust research agenda moving forward. One of the most striking patterns in the work so far has been that peoples' beliefs about the things they are *against* appear to be just as complicated as the things they are *for*. For instance, in the second study above, I provided an open-ended question for participants to elaborate on their trait ratings. One Democrat wrote, "Republicans seem to be resistant to helping people in need, selfish." In the third study, I asked individuals what question they want to ask the other party about guns. One Republican wrote, "Why is every space of importance (hospitals, government owned buildings, offices) guarded with guns, but not schools? The most important place." Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans have entire stories about the others' beliefs, which are not adequately described by measures of belief systems (i.e., Converse 1964), party animosity (i.e., Iyengar et al. 2012), or stereotypes (i.e., Rothschild et al. 2019). One major goal moving forward will be to outline the contours of these beliefs, which are almost like shadow belief systems. Furthermore, the more I understand these beliefs, the more I will be able to develop well-targeted interventions to disarm them.

Because the book project is about ideological empathy and polarization, there is also lots of room moving forward to investigate more basic questions about ideological empathy. For instance, other than motivated reasoning, what are the psychological processes involved when one individual listens to a perspective they disagree with? To what extent is this a dispositional or a learned behavior? In the context of regular political talk, how does ideological empathy (or lack of it) change the unfolding nature of conversations?

Related Research Streams

As part of my work as a Postdoctoral Scholar at the Berkeley Center for American Democracy (BCAD), my other major project currently involves studying patriotism in the U.S. public, as a potential balm for polarization. At BCAD, we have funding (from the Tideline Foundation) for a project on patriotism that is one party political theory, and two parts political behavior. I am leading the political behavior portion. As one part of the project, I ran a series of surveys investigating the extent to which the public is unified or divided around conceptions of patriotism. The viewpoint I bring is similar to that of the ideological empathy work. Some scholars have posited that levels of public patriotism are impressive (Citrin and Sears 2014), while others have pointed out partisan divisions. I expect that the areas of unity and division are both important. To clarify the conditions that showcase unity or division, I ask survey respondents about 15 facets of patriotism (freedom of speech, equal opportunity, the military, etc.). But I randomly assign them to one of three conditions with a different question format for each condition – agree/disagree that you are proud of that facet, ranking the facets, or answering a tradeoff about the facet. One key result was evidence that some of the unity around patriotism could be acquiescence bias. For instance, Republicans appear moderately positive about social movements and ethnic diversity on the agree/disagree format, but on the ranking format they rank these facets very low.

This Fall we will pursue the second phase of the project where we run experiments testing messages about patriotism. Levendusky (2018) found that priming patriotism and national identity can reduce affective polarization. But the effects were somewhat modest, and the treatment prompt was centrist and uncontroversial in its message. We will test messages at different levels of party lean and agreeableness to see which, if any, can unite a critical mass of the public.

Overall, my research also covers a broad array of areas. In a study published in the *Economics of Education Review*, my co-authors and I investigate biases in the provision of college disability services by emailing a survey and embedded experiment to a sample of disability counselors. In this way, we investigate how the attitudes of policy administrators affect service outcomes for an underprivileged group, students with disabilities. We found a bias toward students with non-physical disabilities. I have also co-authored book chapters on affective polarization and science misinformation. Regarding upcoming work, David Broockman and I have started a project looking at California ballot-measure data to explain gaps between poll results and the final election outcome. We will furthermore run experiments to test whether ballot-measure campaign messages activate latent issue attitudes. I have additionally been in discussions with potential co-authors on projects concerning motivated reasoning (with Robin Bayes, Rowan University), the interaction of ideologies and group-based identities (with Adam Howat, Oberlin College), the dynamics of cross-cutting conversations in online chat rooms (with Erin Rossiter, Notre Dame, and Greg Wurm, BYU), or further measuring asymmetries in the ways Democrats and Republicans view each other (with John Konicki, UC-Berkeley).

Finally, I am excited for unanticipated ideas. One of my chief strengths is my ability to translate across different scholarly perspectives – whether these come from different fields (i.e., political science, psychology, public policy) or research approaches (such as different approaches to ideology). I can identify what is compelling about particular perspectives, but also where perspectives lie in tension. This skillset serves as a perpetual source of research ideas, and I am confident that moving forward it will help me continue to build a robust, long-term research record.

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