



MOTIVATED POLITICAL EMPATHY: THE ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF OUTGROUP EMPATHY AVOIDANCE

Luiza Almeida Santos, Jan Gerrit Voelkel, Robb Willer, Jamil Zaki

BACKGROUND

Political polarization in the U.S. is on the rise¹ and stark ideological differences in the electorate can give rise to empathic failures across party lines.

Given that people's motivations to approach and or avoid empathy can have important consequences for political attitudes², we investigated the **beliefs preceding these motivations and their downstream consequences**. Specifically, we assessed the effects of believing political empathy is either useful (or harmful) for political persuasion.

Current Questions

- (1) What are the beliefs and motivations underlying political empathy avoidance?
- (2) What are the consequences of these beliefs for partisan animosity and bipartisan cooperation?

METHODS

STUDY 1
Correlational
310 Participants
52% Republican

STUDY 2
Experiment
607 Participants
50% Republican

Conditions:
High Utility of
Empathy
Low Utility of
Empathy

Excerpt of High [Low] Utility of Empathy Condition:
"Experts in persuasion have found that empathy can, in fact, **enhance** [impede] our judgments and make us better [worse] negotiators."

Measures

IV/MC

Political Empathy Avoidance - e.g., "To what extent to do feel that empathizing with Democrats [Republicans] would be threatening to your views as a Republican [Democrat]?"

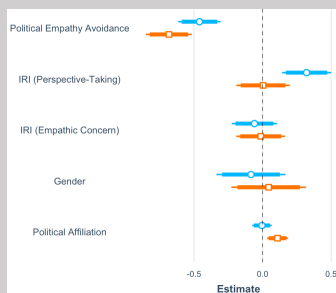
Mediators

Preferences for Outgroup Empathy - "How much empathy do you want to feel toward Republicans [Democrats]?"
Outgroup Empathy - "How much empathy do you generally feel toward Republicans [Democrats]?"

DVs

Desire to Cooperate Across Party Lines - e.g., "To what extent would you like Democratic and Republican parties to cooperate more, even if it means compromising on issues you care about?"
Moral Disengagement - e.g., "Republicans [Democrats] are not just better for politics—they are morally right."
Outgroup Feeling thermometer - "Indicate how you feel towards Democrats [Republicans] (1 = Extremely cold/unfavorable, 7 = Extremely warm/favorable"

RESULTS



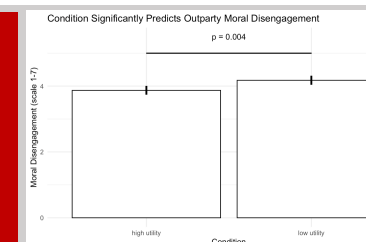
Dependent Variables
● Across-Party Cooperation
■ Positive Outgroup Affect

After controlling for trait empathy (IRI), gender and political affiliation, political empathy avoidance remains a strong negative predictor of desire for bipartisan cooperation ($b = -0.46, p < .0001$) and positive outgroup affect ($b = -0.68, p < .0001$)

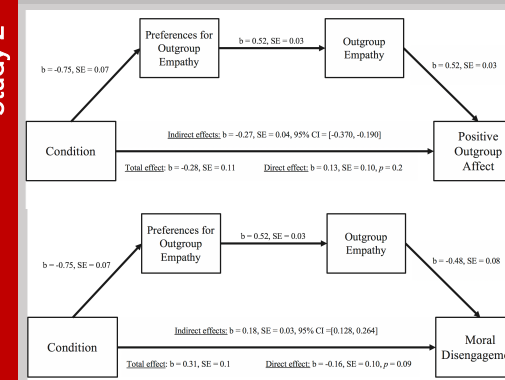
In Study 2, we established the causal effects of political empathy avoidance on bipartisan cooperation, positive outgroup affect, and moral disengagement



Study 2



Condition significantly predicts willingness to cooperate across parties $t(603) = 4.84, p < .0001$, positive outgroup affect $t(591) = 2.65, p = .008$, and moral disengagement $t(602) = -2.95, p = .003$.



Mechanism -> Serial Mediations
Beliefs about the (dis)utility of empathy impact positive outgroup affect and moral disengagement through group-based empathic motivations and experiences.

SUMMARY

People's lay theories about the utility of empathizing with the outgroup shape their affective experiences, their willingness to cooperate across parties, and their likelihood of embracing partisan moral disengagement.

Our findings suggest that changing underlying beliefs about the utility of empathy in political contexts can have important consequences for partisan animosity and civil political interactions.

REFERENCES AND CONTACT

1. Prior, M. (2013). Media and political polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16, 101–127
2. Porat, R., Halperin, E., & Tamir, M. (2016). What we want is what we get: Group-based emotional preferences and conflict resolution. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 110(2), 167.

Contact email: lsantos1@stanford.edu