# WHAT PROMOTES PLURALISM

IN AMERICA'S DIVERSIFYING DEMOCRACY?

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JUNE 2023

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ABSTRACT

Pluralism asks that individuals recognize and validate differences within a community in a way that facilitates not only the civil coexistence of diverse peoples, cultures, and worldviews, but also their cooperation. Pluralism is essential for the United States to fulfill its promise as a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-factional democracy. Recently, however, American pluralism has been strained by the reorientation of political debate to social issues that are tightly tethered to matters of personal identity and beliefs. In this review of over 200 relevant sources, we explore the political and social consequences of pluralism and division, and we evaluate research that attempts to cultivate pluralism, mitigate prejudice, and ultimately foster greater equality and inclusivity.

We find that the United States faces two overarching, long-running, and intertwined challenges that increasingly fuel division: 1) changing demographics and (2) the sorting of demographic and ideological groups into two increasingly distinct and identity-aligned political parties. While most Americans do not have strong political leanings, these more moderate individuals are less likely to exercise their political voices and power than those who have staunch political ties. The growing alignment of ethnic, religious, and political identities into "mega-identities" has challenged pluralistic ideals and weakened America's democratic institutions. There is extensive space for social innovation to identify new interventions to address these challenges, but current social science suggests that headway can be made by galvanizing public bodies and private actors to facilitate more intergroup contact.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pluralism is an evolutionary process, subject to new challenges.

America—a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-factional democracy—is a delicate experiment, and pluralism is crucial to fulfilling its promise. Pluralism not only allows for the civil coexistence of diverse peoples, but also makes it possible for all people in the community to cooperate and flourish. It is not simply the acceptance of diversity; it supports a society in which individuals recognize and validate differences within a community and balance multiple values. Yet pluralism is not a static state that can be achieved and preserved. Rather, it represents an approach to social affairs and a dynamic tension that is always in negotiation, evolving with the changing composition and character of the nation and its people.

Recently, American pluralism has been strained by the reorientation of its political debate around social issues that are tightly tethered to matters of personal identity and religious beliefs. The intensifying discussions about race, immigration, gender identity, sexuality, and religion reveal a fundamental disagreement about who we are and what we value. As a result, political debate now has an increasingly existential quality, and we have witnessed spikes in political- and identity-based violence, as well as a growing appetite for anti-democratic tactics designed to silence or disempower opponents. Political sides have sought to establish the hegemony of their worldview to create a sense of security in a nation that is experiencing economic transformation, technological disruption, and—perhaps most importantly—demographic change.

Pluralism is essential for the United States to fulfill its promise as a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-factional democracy.
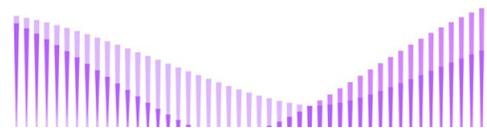
Demographers are projecting that America will have no ethnic or racial majority by the 2040s. As immigration to the country remains relatively steady and fertility rates among non-Hispanic white people are declining, the non-Hispanic white population will no longer be a majority. This milestone looms large over American electoral politics. As some politicians are desperately trying to uphold antecedent value systems and others are questioning the idea of establishing any national values at all, democratic institutions have become destabilized, and the challenge of pluralism has become much more complex. While pluralism

once only required that Americans tolerate people with different values and backgrounds, it now requires Americans to balance competing worldviews in national civic life—or, at a minimum, to redefine the way one understands the nation.

We present a forward-looking, landscaping study of what promotes pluralism today.

In this review, we acknowledge the historical legacies that produced today's division and polarization in the United States, but we are deliberately forward-looking. We seek to identify the contemporary factors that are sustaining today's challenges, as well as the interventions that could resolve them. We begin by defining pluralism, noting its competing interpretations and observable implications. We then present a landscape of American pluralism today, focusing on differences related to race, religion, and partisanship—the three predominant fault lines in American society. After we explore the political and social consequences of pluralism and division, we outline research on efforts to cultivate pluralism and mitigate prejudice. In particular, we focus on interventions designed to (a) alter mindsets, (b) alter patterns of intergroup relationships, or (c) alter public institutions. We acknowledge that there may be other ways of understanding and contending with pluralism that are more spiritual or cultural, but we focus only on interventions that have the clearly defined and measurable outcomes that social science can reliably detect and rigorously evaluate. Throughout, we also address shortcomings and weaknesses, as we see them, in the current body of knowledge.

America's division is driven by demographic change and political polarization.

We find that the United States faces two overarching, long-running, and intertwined challenges that increasingly fuel division: (1) changing demographics and (2) the sorting of demographic and ideological groups into two increasingly distinct and identity-aligned political parties. The racial, ethnic, and religious change represented by the first challenge is surmountable. Polities around the world and throughout history have mediated conflict arising from demographic shifts, and social scientists have tested tools that governments and civil society can use to reduce backlash to change from the dominant group. The second challenge, the sorting of groups into increasingly distinct political coalitions, has been building for decades and is more intractable. It has intensified our politics, increased political divisions in the mass public, and impeded the compromises necessary for the government to function.

Research shows, however, that most Americans are not hardcore adherents of either political party. This population does not pay significant attention to politics, and they largely seek to avoid political debates and conflicts. The increasing polarization and partisan animosity are concentrated among activists, interest groups, and the minority of the American public that is highly attuned to politics. This group of hyper-politicized elites[1] and consistent voters, though, currently shapes political outcomes and overwhelmingly determines how the country will navigate these challenges. And as long as either of America's predominant political parties believes that reform will give its opponents an edge, institutional change is unlikely to take place, except perhaps at the most local levels. Even municipal and state-level reforms, however, would represent a positive step and may serve as a proof-of-concept that motivates more comprehensive reform in the future. It is also possible that the apolitical majority can serve as a wellspring of moderation should civic

groups be able to mobilize a share of them to pursue forms of civic engagement that act as a counterweight.

The key is multiplying meaningful interactions between people of different social groups.

Social science suggests a few paths forward. First, researchers have implemented interventions that encourage people to share their perspectives in order to generate empathy. These efforts show potential, although they are challenging to scale. Another promising strategy is to galvanize public bodies and private actors to facilitate more contact between people from different groups, across various spaces and within various, pre-existing institutions. Although the most rigorous evidence suggests that meaningful interactions between people who belong to different social groups only marginally reduce prejudice and the perceived distance between them, a marginal positive effect multiplied across millions of people in multiple contexts could yield great dividends. In planning America's path back to pluralism, there remains a tremendous amount of room for social innovation, with many actors who are eager to pursue a fair, equal, and cooperative democracy. This review aims to highlight best practices and explore interventions that could support this vital effort.

As a next step, researchers should consider partnering with funders and NGOs to invest in larger-scale, field-based, policy-relevant studies. They should use larger samples that include adults, and they should measure outcomes at various intervals to assess changes in the effects over time. Variation in the audiences and research contexts will allow for a better understanding of the conditions under which interventions are most successful — especially for interventions based on intergroup contact which show the most promise.

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BACKGROUND

American pluralism today has been strained by the reorientation of political debate around social issues that are tightly tethered to matters of personal identity and beliefs. The intensifying discussions about race, immigration, gender, sexuality, and religion in America reveal a fundamental disagreement about the nation's identity and values. These issues have previously arisen in policy discussions related to housing, economic mobility, and policing, but today's most prominent debates revolve around school curricula, public monuments, immigration, and reproduction. Disagreements in all of these domains have an increasingly existential quality, and we have witnessed spikes in political- and identity-based violence, as well as a growing appetite for anti-democratic tactics that are intended to silence or disempower opponents. Rather than acknowledging and accommodating differences, the opposing parties appear to be seeking to establish the hegemony of their respective worldviews. Achieving this hegemony, they seem to believe, would create a sense of security in a nation that is simultaneously experiencing economic transformation, technological disruption, and, most importantly, demographic change.

Historically, pluralism in America was represented by the "melting pot" ideal. Pluralism meant the protection of individuals' customs and values and tolerance of their differences, as long as they were working toward assimilating into the common, dominant culture. As immigration has remained generally steady and fertility rates have declined among non-Hispanic white people, demographers are now projecting an American future without an ethnic or racial majority.[2] The prospect of a "majority minority" nation poses challenges to the melting pot model of pluralism and raises questions about the cultural norms and distributions of power that will prevail once this shift has taken place. Some suggest that we will embrace a new pluralism, in which new and different customs and values will exist alongside those of the traditionally dominant

institutions rather than being absorbed into the dominant culture. Others ask if these newer customs and values will instead become the dominant American culture. The prospect of this demographic shift looms large over American electoral politics, and it has destabilized democratic institutions caught between officials desperately trying to uphold antecedent value systems and those questioning the idea of establishing any national values at all. Pluralism today, then, may entail a precarious balance between different cultures and values in national civic life—or a redefinition of the nation's identity and values altogether.

Throughout history, demographic change has injected enormous uncertainty into political communities. Nations typically identify themselves with the creed of a specific ethno-religious people and attribute their success to that creed, but they are challenged by changes to their ethno-religious composition and the inclusion of people they once excluded. While these contradictions and complexities are commonplace in national histories throughout the world, they are often quickly forgotten as a nation consolidates its new identity. The construction of nations as static and indigenous, then, has served to unify disparate subgroups into a single "people," but nationalism also hardens the conception of the "people," making it difficult to evolve with population change. Pluralism, in fact, is the path to this critical evolution and to peaceful coexistence through it.

All democracies periodically argue about and update their definition of "the people" through the vigorous, sometimes divisive debates that characterize a robust public sphere.[3] Each debate requires "the people" to build new political coalitions, adapt to new ideas, compromise, and accommodate demographic change.[4] These national discussions inevitably alienate groups of people who may be excluded from ruling majorities but who remain in the political community.[5] A commitment to pluralism, however, ensures that there is an underlying sense of inclusion during these periods, which is essential for a nation to survive these debates. In the United States, popular concepts of the nation have changed dramatically over two and a half centuries, and the voices represented in these discussions have changed, as well.

In this review, we acknowledge the historical legacies that produced today's division and polarization in the United States, but we are also deliberately forward-looking. We seek to identify the contemporary factors that sustain this status quo, as well as the interventions that could ameliorate it. We begin by defining pluralism, noting competing interpretations and their observable implications. Modern debates about pluralism have centered on the question of what governments should reasonably do to cultivate it. We present a landscape of American pluralism today, focusing on differences related to race, religion, and particularly partisanship—three of the predominant fault lines in American society—and elucidating the political and social consequences of pluralism and division.[6]

We then outline research that examines attempts to cultivate pluralism and mitigate prejudice. We focus on interventions designed to (a) alter mindsets, (b) alter the patterns of intergroup relationships, or (c) alter public institutions. While we acknowledge that there may be other ways of understanding and contending with pluralism that are more spiritual or cultural, we focus only on interventions with the kind of clearly defined and measurable outcomes that social science can reliably detect and evaluate. Along the way, we address shortcomings and weaknesses, as we see them, in the current body of knowledge.

From our review, we find that the United States faces two overarching, long-running, and intertwined challenges: (1) changing demographics and (2) the sorting of demographic and ideological groups into two increasingly distinct and identity-aligned political parties. These challenges increasingly fuel racial, ethnic, religious, and political division. The first challenge is not insurmountable. Polities around the world and throughout history have experienced racial, ethnic, and religious change and have mediated the conflict that results from a dominant group's reactions to these changes.[7] Social scientists have tested various tools, including meaningful intergroup contact interventions, that governments and civil society can pursue to reduce the dominant group's backlash to change.[8]

The second challenge is less straightforward. The decades-long sorting of groups of people into increasingly distinct political coalitions based on both demographic and ideological factors has intensified our politics, increased political divisions in the mass public, and impeded the compromise necessary for the government to function. There are reasons to be both hopeful and pessimistic about reform in this area. On the positive side, research shows that the increasing polarization and partisan hatred are largely concentrated among elites, interest groups, and the minority of the American public that is highly attuned to and interested in politics. Most Americans are not extreme partisans. They do not pay significant attention to politics, they are not overtly prejudiced, and they largely prefer to avoid political debates and conflicts altogether. It is possible that this apolitical majority can serve as a wellspring of moderation should civic groups be able to mobilize a share of them into forms of civic engagement that act as a counterweight. On the negative side, however, the hyper-politicized elites, interest groups, and highly-partisan and more ideologically extreme voters are the actors who currently shape political outcomes, increasingly embrace culture war electoral tactics, and will overwhelmingly determine how the country will navigate these challenges.

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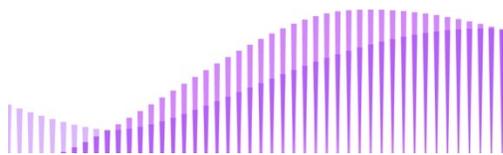
The growing alignment of personal identities into political parties makes the deficit of pluralism inextricable from the weakening of America's democratic institutions. On the bright side, this means that reducing prejudice and social division can facilitate a healthy, sustainable democracy—and a healthy democracy can reduce prejudice and social division. It also means, however, that if we address prejudice in isolation, political institutions have incentives to work against this goal. Likewise, if we reform political institutions but ignore social division, prejudice will undermine people's trust in the institutions. Moreover, as long as either of America's predominant political parties believes that the other party would benefit from institutional change, we see it as unlikely to take place—except perhaps at the most local levels. But even pro-democratic municipal and state-level reforms would be beneficial and could serve as a proof-of-concept that motivates broader reform in the future.[9]

In the interim, social science suggests that headway can be made by galvanizing public bodies and private actors to facilitate more intergroup contact. Though the most rigorous evidence suggests that meaningful interactions between people who belong to different social groups only marginally reduces prejudice and the perceived distance between them, a marginal positive effect multiplied across millions of people in multiple contexts could yield great dividends. America's historical struggle with pluralism was seeded and sustained by policies that limited intergroup contact.[10] Today, their insidious legacy is compounded by rising residential partisan segregation,[11] semi-autonomous states,[12] and the informational segregation of the internet age.[13] The country needs to plan its path back together. Social science illuminates ways to address each of these challenges.

WHAT IS PLURALISM?

Pluralism asks that individuals recognize and validate differences within a community in a way that facilitates not only the civil coexistence of diverse peoples, cultures, and worldviews, but also their cooperation. It is distinct from liberalism and libertarianism, which are wider in their application, but it incorporates their orientation toward openness and freedom. It does not merely entail the acceptance of diversity; rather, it requires a society to balance multiple truths and values. And it is not a static state or a goal to be achieved; pluralism is an ongoing, dynamic tension that is always in negotiation—an approach to social affairs that acknowledges the continuous evolution of the nation and the changing composition and character of its people. As a result, pluralism—like vegetarianism or pacifism—is inherently based on practices that apply its principles. It is often expressed by acts of tolerance. Philosopher Andrew Jason Cohen describes this behavior as "an agent's intentional and principled refraining from interfering with an opposed other (or their behavior, etc.) in situations of diversity, where the agent believes she has the power to interfere."[14]

This conception of pluralism is heavily influenced by the ideas of William James, the philosopher and historian who founded American psychology and once described himself as a "rabid individualist."[15] With individualism in mind, James argued that we should accommodate different people's temperaments and sensibilities simply because they exist and because it is most pragmatic. Nature, he believed, serves as an example of this approach, as the natural world is composed of many different beings, with many different desires, goals, and purposes. He concluded that we should be as "friendly as mother nature."[16]

By contrast, Josiah Royce, James' contemporary at Harvard, argued that individual autonomy without loyalty to certain communities would constitute a form of anarchy—a society of people without a common sense of purpose. For Royce, individuals only find moral structure in their interactions with others and their gravitation toward like minds. The chaos of conflicting personal desires and impulses that we all encounter on a daily basis, he believed, works against this structure. He argued that we come to consciousness in a world that proffers countless well-defined causes and programs for their accomplishment, which together give our lives meaning.[17] The superindividual unity that Royce describes binds an individual not only to others who are loyal to the same service, but also to others who are loyal to their common humanity. The conception of pluralism that follows from this understanding diverges from the coexistence James described. Royce's pluralism is, perhaps, better suited for today's factionalism because it embraces factionalism as integral

to the human condition. For Royce, communities may foster human autonomy, but they also facilitate coexistence in their recognition of other people's need for kinship and concern for the world.[18]

THE LIMITS OF PLURALISM

While pluralism requires a respect for all viewpoints, the extremism that has given rise to the greatest human atrocities tests this view. Philosopher Isaiah Berlin thought extensively about the boundaries of pluralism and its perils. Born a Russian Jew but naturalized to England, Berlin sought to reconcile his appreciation for the fundamental freedom that pluralism afforded to immigrants and refugees with the protection pluralism also seemed to afford the extremism of the Bolshevism and Nazism he witnessed. A multiplicity of human values, he wrote, is "objective, part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of men's subjective fancies. Nevertheless, of course, if I pursue one set of values, I may detest another, and may think it is damaging to the only form of life that I am able to live or tolerate, for myself and others; in which case I may attack it, I may even—in extreme cases—have to go to war against it."[19]

To clarify the distinction between detestable views that can be recognized and validated and those that cannot, Berlin exempts the pluralist from the toleration of views hostile to her existence. Berlin's definition of pluralism resonates with the polarization of America's political and social spheres today. Divisions between the two American political parties have intensified over time as race, religion, and ideology have come to be aligned with partisan identities in ways that they often were not in eras when the two parties were both relatively heterogenous coalitions.[20] This sorting has ratcheted up the perceived stakes of political conflict; political debate has transformed from disagreement over ideas to existential debate over values, morals, identities, and people themselves.

In our view, a number of political entrepreneurs have capitalized on the existential nature of these debates, using it to delegitimize their opponents in order to win power and solidify more fervent support. They stoke the sense that their opponents do not merely disagree with them, but that they are intent on destroying their ways of life. Prominent members of both parties frequently cast their opponents as irredeemably evil, and they suggest conspiracies to attack their social or political status. This hyperbole creates a sense for some people that fellow citizens pose an existential threat that must be addressed with whatever means necessary. This characterization is, of course, an exaggeration of most Americans' views,[21] but these practices raise questions about the kinds of ideas that are acceptable in a pluralistic society, and the limits that bound bridge-building—particularly when bigotry or anti-democratic pursuits that violate the equal status on which pluralism depends are involved.

PLURALISM AS A POLITICAL PRINCIPLE

These practices also raise questions about the role of the state in shaping, protecting, and maintaining a thriving pluralistic society. Is pluralism a political principle to be established normatively by democratic institutions, or is it a social value that must be more actively cultivated? As a political principle, toleration ensures that individual liberties are protected and that people are treated equally by the state, independent of religion, morality, and lifestyle.[22] Political theorist Michael Walzer calls those who espouse this traditional approach "old pluralists" and explains that they see democratic citizenship—the participation in power-

sharing and self-governance—as the force that supports diversity by holding different groups together.[23]

The political theorist Chandran Kukathas has likened this pluralist vision of a liberal society to an archipelago[24]—a series of isolated islands, each cut off from the others and left to pursue its own conscience. He contends that the state should respect and tolerate their differences, as long as each island is neither infringing upon the liberties of other islands nor prohibiting inhabitants to leave for other islands. Unity has no real value for Kukathas, and interventions to cultivate unity threaten diversity and people's freedom to pursue their conscience. However, Kukathas disregards differences in the resources and status of different islands in the metaphorical chain, and he is not concerned that the islands may be governed in illiberal ways.[25]

PLURALISM AS A SOCIAL VALUE

By contrast, another group of scholars perceives pluralism as a social value that must be cultivated and is fundamental to a liberal society. The philosopher John Dewey, for example, argued that the state should not be "only an umpire to avert and remedy trespasses of one group upon another." Political power has a larger function, he contended: "It renders the desirable association solider and more coherent. [...] It gives the individual members [...] greater liberty and security; it relieves them of hampering conditions."[26] Walzer revives this argument in his explanation of groups' need to be recognized and respected. He writes: "They need a place in the world: legal standing, an institutional presence, resources. And then they need to coexist with other groups similarly 'placed,' roughly equal to themselves. [...] Fights over recognition seem to have an all-or-nothing quality, but the negotiation of difference among groups that already have standing and presence, political and economic resources, invites compromise."[27] As Anna Galeotti points out, the line between Walzer's pluralism and distributive justice, however, is quite thin if the extent of a group's resources and opportunity is of more concern than individuals' equal liberties.[28]

In the United States today, the debate about pluralism as a principle or social value is often proxied (and preceded) by the question of racial equality and the extent to which minority subgroups have come to hold equal status—and, by implication, require no further state action. Many conservatives have argued that the fundamental protections provided by law sufficiently produce equal status.[29] And accordingly, many on the American right have opposed state accommodations made for minority groups because they fear that state attempts to facilitate equal opportunity will infringe on markets, meritocracy, and basic freedoms. More stridently, as governments, businesses, and civil

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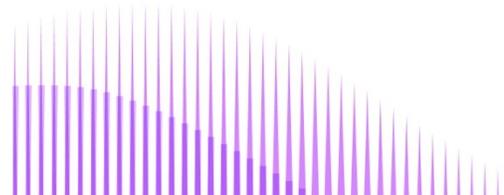
society organizations create more social protections for minorities in the name of addressing disparities and patterns of discrimination, some white conservatives have argued that they too should be thought of as a discriminated social group with norms and customs in need of accommodation.[30] In court cases in 2014 and 2018, white Christians received accommodations that protect their right to deny wedding services to same-sex couples[31] or birth control in employee health plans on account of cultural differences[32]—much as minority groups previously sought exemptions from language requirements[33] or drug laws.[34] More recently, far-right conservatives have sued to protect white nationalist speech and misinformation on social media sites.[35]

Progressive activists argue, however, that the lived experiences of many minority groups in the United States defy the principles purportedly protected by law. Policies that target groups based on ascriptive characteristics like race and ethnicity are necessary, they argue, to reverse the effects of centuries of open discrimination against these groups. They do not see some conservatives' push for accommodations as a demand for 'rights' or 'freedoms.' Rather, they see these efforts as an attempt to institutionalize a specific moral framework and power structure in the face of great demographic change. According to these activists, there may be more sympathy for rights-based grievances if white people really were equally 'marginalized,'[36] and if their views weren't historically connected to the subjugation of other American subgroups. The American left argues that white people have, in fact, historically set the boundaries of 'normal' and 'different' in American society, dating back to the penning of the Constitution. As a result, they not only brought about an unequal distribution of resources or opportunity among social groups, but also determined people's potential to be recognized and validated as full citizens.[37]

The current American stalemate is the product of zero-sum logic. Some conservatives are concerned that the historical white, Christian majority will be subjugated in the name of equality or penalized for their ancestors' sins; and some progressives are concerned that white Christians will seek to subjugate minorities and protect their privileged status. In these examples, pluralism challenges conservatives to tolerate and even facilitate the coexistence of alternative moral structures to ensure the survival of their own. And it asks progressives to ensure that white Americans feel there is still space for conservative values.[38] Recognizing and validating the other as an enduring stakeholder in American society while navigating competing visions of pluralist democracy may be the greatest social challenge for the next generation. How close or far are we from this ideal?

THE STATE OF PLURALISM TODAY

The superdiversity of the United States makes pluralism especially challenging, but it may also make it more possible. Americans originate from hundreds of countries, hundreds of religions, and hundreds of ethnicities, and they speak hundreds of languages. Once in the United States, Americans—regardless of the duration of their family's history in this country—become further shuffled into different economic classes, different levels of educational attainment, different geographical contexts, different gender identities and sexual orientations, and different political ideologies. Pluralism mediates the differences between these many, intersecting groups. While each of these differences play a role in the challenge of pluralism, we

focus more narrowly in this review on research about pluralism as it relates to differences in race, religion, and partisanship, as there is evidence that these three fault lines today supersede the others in dividing American society.[39] Race, religion, and partisanship, in other words, are the primary, contested aspects of identity that require the recognition and validation that pluralism promises.

THE AMERICAN PREDICAMENT

America's almost infinite intersectionality complicates any simple division of the people. The country's demographic change is not the product of a sudden or controversial influx of foreigners; American immigrants have arrived continuously. This ongoing immigration has layered old forms of diversity with new diversity in each passing generation. Moreover, it has given the United States a sense of agency in the composition of its population. Apart from the undocumented and some asylum seekers, the government endorses the arrival and settlement of all immigrants. And after centuries of state-mandated segregation and decades of self-sorting into diverse cities and a more homogenous countryside, ethno-religious minorities are present in all US regions. Over 96 percent of US counties experienced an increase in the racial and ethnic diversity of their populations between 2010 and 2020.[40] The rate of inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriage—and therefore the population of multi-ethnic and mixed-religion children—is also now growing, blurring ethnic boundaries and religious orientations. In fact, fewer than 50 percent of Americans now identify as Protestant, and the share who identify as Christian has been in steady decline for two decades. One in three Americans is now religiously unaffiliated.[41] The infinite combinations of these intersecting identities and their accompanying cultures and ideologies could confound attempts to assert a single, exclusive lineage and normative framework.

This extraordinary diversity, however, has been sorted into America's vexing binary of whiteness.[42] While the meaning of whiteness is contested and ever-changing, scholars point out that whiteness—and its Protestant Christian underpinnings in the United States—historically has been leveraged to render status and resources to those who qualify, motivate immigrants' assimilation into a related "American" creed, and subjugate those deemed to be too different.[43] Whiteness has frustrated political movements attempting to organize people along class lines, and whiteness has lingered even when the vast majority of Americans are no longer of the Northern European, Protestant origins that initially characterized it.[44] The allure of whiteness endures because those who hold the status it conveys are reluctant to relinquish it, and they act in their self-interest. Insidiously, the adaptability of whiteness to changes in American ethnic and religious demography (the Irish, Italians, Jews, Slavs, etc.) also communicates an openness to the eligibility of people once excluded. Any socially organizing force this strong and persistent will inevitably be exploited by politicians, and so American politics has historically been similarly split along racial, ethnic, and religious boundaries.

Today, the United States is defined by high levels of racial, ethnic, and religious tension, all subsumed under intensifying partisan hostility. Racial and religious considerations have increasingly come to influence many aspects of political decision-making, from voters' evaluations of candidates running for public office to ostensibly unrelated issues like health care and evaluations of objective economic conditions.[45] During Donald Trump's presidency, for example, his inflammatory speech was found by social scientists

to embolden racists[46] and encourage racially prejudiced people to express more prejudice themselves.[47] Together, this shift has weakened norms around the expression of racial prejudice and inspired politicians to leverage it in political campaigns.[48] Meanwhile, Democrats have steadily moved to the left on issues of racial justice, gender,[49] and immigration.[50] The result is two parties that are increasingly polarized at both the elite and mass levels on issues of race and religion.

RESPONSES TO DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

We see the current public debates over subjects related to immigration policy and identity as central, proxy battles for unresolved conflicts over racial, ethnic, and religious differences. Immigrants embody the promise and perils of a diverse population, and their arrival heralds even more change. While some observers point to the role of perceived competition for jobs and public resources, the scholarly consensus is that animosity toward immigration and immigrants is predominantly driven by cultural and racial considerations,[51] even when opposition is explained in economic terms.[52] Anti-immigrant nativism has particularly spiked in places that have experienced the fastest pace—but not necessarily the highest levels[53]—of demographic change.[54] A meta-analysis of 171 studies since 1995 finds that increasing demographic change is associated with a greater sense of cultural threat among the native-born.[55]

Most Americans' limited understanding of the number of immigrants in the United States or even within their own communities may play a role in these perceptions. Across numerous studies, respondents tend to overestimate the number of immigrants,[56] overestimate their religious, cultural, or geographic distance from immigrants,[57] and underestimate immigrants' socioeconomic status.[58] Immigrants are misperceived as detrimental to native-born people's wages,[59] employment,[60] access to public services,[61] and safety.[62] Compounding these perceptions, increasing shares of the population are adopting conspiracy theories that elites are deliberately altering racial and ethnic distributions.[63] These various perceptions of immigrants, racial minorities, and religious sects have been found to be stable over time, difficult to change,[64] and immune to corrections, suggesting that they are both a cause *and* consequence of anti-immigrant attitudes.[65]

More broadly, the pursuit of pluralist values amidst a relatively shrinking white population confronts a variety of psychological headwinds. Such demographic change is generally perceived as a threat to dominant group status, and psychologists find that this threat is sensed regardless of people's ideological orientations.[66] In a 2012 study, Robert Outten and his colleagues found that a sample of white Americans randomly exposed to demographic projections of a future white minority reported feeling greater sympathy for white people and significantly more anger toward and fear of ethnic minorities than participants who were only exposed to demographic information accurate as of 2003.[67] Similarly, in a 2015 study, Maria Abascal gave American respondents information about Hispanic population growth and then tested the effect of the information on their redistributive generosity. White people who received this information contributed significantly more to white recipients than black recipients; they were also significantly more likely to define their identity as "white" rather than as "American."[68] Finally, Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson found that participants who read about future American racial demographics expressed a greater relative preference for being in settings and interactions with other white people than with racial minorities, compared to those who did not receive the treatment.[69] Like Abascal, the researchers found that such bias emerged even in reference

to minority groups that are not primarily responsible for the dramatic increases in the non-white share of the total US population.

This type of lab or survey experiment that shares news of demographic shifts with Americans has been criticized for its artificiality; these studies measure responses to news about demographic changes in an unnatural environment—not responses to real demographic change in people's everyday environments. In response to this criticism, researchers have used creative techniques to simulate demographic change and test its effects on public attitudes. In a 2014 study, for example, Ryan Enos assigned a small number of Spanish-speaking individuals to board particular commuter train stations in homogeneous white communities in the Boston metropolitan area at the same time each day for two weeks. This effort exposed the same commuters to a diversifying population repeatedly. Enos found that respondents who waited on platforms with Spanish-speaking bystanders favored more exclusionary policies, indicating that threatening behavior is "not a necessary component for the stimulation of exclusionary attitudes."[70] Notably, Enos recorded opinions after three days and again after ten days. While opinions on both days were more exclusionary among the group waiting with Spanish-speaking bystanders than among those who did not see any demographic change, opinions on Day 3 were more exclusionary than those on Day 10, indicating

> We seek to identify the contemporary factors that are sustaining today's challenges, as well as the interventions that could resolve them.
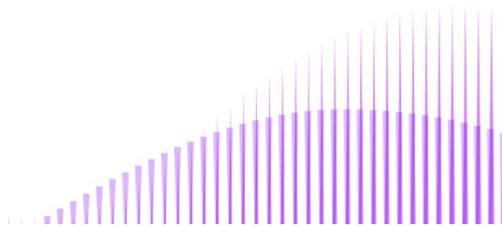
that longer exposure to an outgroup may moderate negative reactions and ultimately lead to comfort. These findings dovetail nicely with research on "acculturating contexts." This work finds that opposition to local influxes of immigrant residents is strongest in areas that have had little to no previous exposure to recent immigrant groups.[71]

Research indicates that even when native-born populations recognize the integration of ethnic minorities and immigrants, the native-born continue to perceive them to be different. In a 2016 survey, Ariela Schachter showed respondents two profiles of possible neighbors. She then asked them which of the two individuals they would rather have as a neighbor and how they would rate the individuals' similarity to themselves. White Americans, she found, are generally open to relationships with individuals with immigrant origins, although they are less accepting of Black immigrants, Black natives, and undocumented immigrants.

At the same time, however, many white, native-born individuals view all racial minorities—regardless of their citizenship status or other characteristics—as very dissimilar to themselves, suggesting that structural assimilation may be occurring without symbolic acceptance from many Americans.[72] In a separate study, when researchers randomly primed certain respondents with statements about demographic change and the threat to white status, they were more likely to characterize mixed-race faces as "non-white."[73] Non-white groups, then, may not be culturally accepted even as they assimilate.[74] Indeed, in a 2022 study, Mina Cikara and colleagues showed that the growth of minority groups, regardless of their levels of assimilation,

has been linked to spikes in hate crimes across the US and UK over the last few decades.[75]

Like many issues related to race and demographic change, beliefs about immigration and America's majority minority future have become a sort of litmus test for partisanship. It seems that America's two political camps have hardened into those who largely embrace its increasingly diverse future, and those who primarily resist it. On one side, many leaders talk of globalism, immigration, and reparation. On the other, many invoke nationalism, nativism, and nostalgia.[76] This divergence is distinctly different from even the mid-2000s, when many conservatives backed comprehensive immigration reform bills that included pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.[77]

PARTISAN POLARIZATION AND IDENTITY ALIGNMENT

American politics have grown more racialized and more polarized. Recent political campaigns have been defined by cultural debates over immigration,[78] race[79] and Islam.[80] Moreover, since 2001, nearly all racial and non-Christian religious minorities have strongly leaned Democratic,[81] and more than four out of every five Republican voters have been white.[82],[83] American politics have not always been divided so clearly along racial lines. In 2000, for example, about 70% of Muslim Americans voted for George W. Bush, and Bush nearly split the Latino vote in 2004. In 1992, about 55% of Asian Americans voted for his father. Political polarization has since skyrocketed—at the national level,[84] at the state level,[85] and by almost any metric.[86] Some ordinary Americans increasingly dislike and distrust those from the other party; they see those who align with the other party as "hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded," and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines.[87] Many view their partisan counterparts as existential threats,[88] and clever experiments have shown that partisan discrimination can be even more severe than racial discrimination.[89]

The causes of partisan polarization are complex and multi-faceted, but scholars point to the sorting of different identities like race, ethnicity, religion, region, and ideology into partisan camps—which we call "identity alignment"—as one of the primary drivers. Ideological and partisan differences were once exempted from discussions of American pluralism because these were chosen positions—as opposed to innate or immutable differences. These differences of opinion, it was believed, could be reconciled, compromised, or overlooked. In the spirit of Isaiah Berlin, people believed that they could disdain their ideological opponent's beliefs without disdaining the person at a more existential level. Indeed, at different junctures in history, parties promoted pluralism in order to unite diverse constituencies of voters.[90]

Recent dynamics in American society, however, have created a set of circumstances in which the divisions between people of different races and religions have been absorbed into previously unrelated partisan divisions. As Lilliana Mason explains in *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity,* this change transforms political orientations from bundles of preferences into "mega-identities." This shift has potentially disastrous effects. It increases the stakes of political disagreement from a conflict over ideas to a conflict of existential importance. For the most politically engaged, a political disagreement has become a disagreement over fundamental values, identities, habits, beliefs, and ways of life—to the extent that the opposing partisans see themselves as fundamentally different from, and even incomprehensible to, one another.[91] At the extreme, this alignment can inspire individuals to recategorize their religious, class,

or sexual identities to conform to partisan prototypes.[92] As disputes over personal values have engulfed American politics, parties that were once a vehicle for pluralism have become its principal impediments. Every disagreement is a proxy battle in a superordinate culture war.

Because the possible causes and consequences of intergroup conflict are structural phenomena that have co-evolved over the last several decades, it is ultimately difficult to reliably determine the causal order. That is, it is not clear that the causes researchers have identified temporally precede the effects. For example, the tighter alignment of party identities with social identities related to race, ethnicity, religion, unionization, and geography[93] has coincided with parties' propensity to invoke identity politics and culture wars; it is not clear, however, if parties' rhetoric, to some extent, drove such alignment or, by contrast, if greater identity alignment inspired the rhetoric and policymaking.[94] Still, we believe it is useful to understand the role of these structural factors like identity alignment if they are to be overcome.

Identity alignment exists alongside several other factors that have been shown to have contributed to our current division. Many scholars have focused on the critical role of elites as models for political behavior and endorsers of social attitudes.[95] According to Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, pernicious polarization arises when political entrepreneurs pursue their political objectives by using polarizing strategies, such as mobilizing voters with demonizing discourse and exploiting existing grievances. Opposing political elites then reciprocate with similarly polarizing tactics or fail to develop effective non-polarizing responses.[96] By choosing the cleavage or grievance to highlight, political elites drive the polarization, stoking fears, anxieties, and resentments that then become expressed as hostility, bias, and eventually enmity.[97] Moreover, as candidates have grown more reliant on ideologically extreme donors for campaign dollars, these extreme voices garner disproportionate influence.[98]

MEDIA DYNAMICS

Since the 1990s, the media environment has amplified this hostility. After the Reagan Administration terminated the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) "fairness doctrine" in 1987, American media gradually shifted away from impartiality to overtly partisan content. As listeners and viewers have grown more receptive to consuming information through a partisan lens, the news media has inflamed political sectarianism.[99] Concurrently, the internet has emerged as a polarized information ecosystem—by design. Algorithms sort users into homogenous social networks that limit people's exposure to dissonant opinions and news that does not fit their broader narrative. Information cascades, in which individuals observe and adopt the behavior of others, allow the actions of a few individuals to proliferate quickly.[100]

Nevertheless, the extent to which most Americans are falling prey to media echo chambers and exposed to increasingly emotional, inflammatory, or false news is contested. The best evidence suggests that only a small portion of already extreme partisans is regularly exposed to extreme and ideologically slanted sites.[101] Even more contested and less well understood is the true effect of increased internet and social media use on our politics. Conventional wisdom and a large body of research indicate that the internet and the use of social media, in particular, have increased affective polarization, increased the likelihood of violence, spurred political dysfunction, decreased trust in political institutions, and facilitated the rise and strength

of populist movements. Numerous high-quality studies, however, have found mixed or null results across all of these outcomes.[102] The lack of clear conclusions in research on the internet and social media highlights the difficulty of studying the effects of digital media on political outcomes. Technology platforms are evolving at breakneck speed; their algorithms, user bases, and influence wax and wane over time, which complicates any clear and enduring conclusions we might be able to draw. Further, rigorous experimental studies of the effects of social media platforms like Meta's Facebook, for example, require these large organizations to grant researchers access to internal systems and data, which could open them up to unflattering findings and user backlash.[103] As a result, only internal research teams have a sense of the true impact of these social media giants on the public.

CONSEQUENCES OF INTERGROUP CONFLICT

The insidious creep of social division and partisan polarization is thought to hold downstream consequences for everything from everyday conviviality to the integrity of democratic institutions. Political divisions are spilling over into leisure activities, consumption behaviors, aesthetics, and personal moral preferences. These disagreements have been shown to affect choices such as whom to marry, when and whether to have children, child-rearing responsibilities, and whether to pray.[104] At the most local levels, they change the way individuals interact with one another and atrophy the habits of productive coexistence. Researchers have found that Americans are less willing to engage in social interactions with out-partisans,[105] and that discussions between out-partisans, when they do occur, are shorter in duration.[106] People have also been found to be less willing to live in integrated communities[107] and less willing to date those who align with the other party.[108] Less formally, Americans have been observed to avoid conversations with out-partisans, reject invitations to socialize with out-partisans, and refuse to help an out-partisan neighbor.[109] Even in commercial markets, historically a space of blind economic calculation and interdependency, researchers have identified a preference for purchasing goods and services from co-partisans[110] and companies that reflect individuals' social and political values.[111] These tendencies minimize intergroup contact in the recreational and economic spaces that best facilitate it.

More alarmingly, affective polarization increases schadenfreude to news about a member of an out-group's misfortune,[112] it leads partisans to dehumanize their political opponents in both subtle and blatant ways,[113] and a small share of partisans are driven to violent tactics of intimidation.[114] Unlike race, gender, and other social divides in which group-related attitudes and behaviors are subject to social norms,[115] there are no corresponding pressures to temper disapproval of political opponents. In fact, the rhetoric and actions of political leaders often demonstrate that hostility directed at the opposition is acceptable and appropriate.[116]

If division and polarization are affecting settings that have historically been less political, it is unsurprising that its impact in overtly political settings has been severe. Research indicates that in-group preservation clouds individuals' abilities to evaluate policy alternatives and an elected official's performance objectively.[117] In a seminal study, Geoffrey Cohen found that liberal and conservative undergraduates based their attitudes regarding the content of a policy and its merit in light of long-held ideological beliefs if they did not have any information about their party's position on the issue. If, however, information about their party's position

was available, participants assumed that position as their own, regardless of the content of the policy and regardless of their prior knowledge about the policy.[118]

Worse, researchers find that affective polarization corrupts evaluations of elected officials—the critical feedback loop that incentivizes political parties to govern well.[119] Partisan bias prevents voters from crediting opposing party incumbents when the economy grows under their stewardship, and it prevents them from penalizing in-party incumbents whose economic performance is suspect.[120] This effect has been found to decrease trust in government more generally and to reduce voter pressure on their leaders to compromise.[121] Polarization has made it almost impossible for partisans to abandon their party's candidates, no matter their shortcomings.[122] As a result, elections do not moderate party positions as well, and political entrepreneurs are more free to pull their caucuses into extreme positions.[123]

In the current era, fringe movements are flourishing inside the tents of US political parties, which only reinforces each side's moral distance from the other. Extensive comparative political research documents a correlation between the rise of the far right, in particular, and growing populations of ethnic and religious minorities.[124]

There is some debate on whether affective polarization also weakens people's commitment to democratic norms. This argument has gained salience in the aftermath of former President Trump's attempt to use "fake electors"[125] to spuriously validate his re-election in 2020, and the January 6, 2021, insurrection that disrupted Congress' certification of President Joe Biden's victory. During the proceedings, numerous Republican members of Congress refused to certify, and many have continued to publicly dispute the results, even while accepting their own re-election on the same 2020 ballots. The press has also documented a variety of Republican attempts to pass laws expected to suppress voter turnout and invalidate some ballots, as well as Democrats' and Republicans' attempts to gerrymander congressional districts to decrease out-partisan representation.

It is not simply the acceptance of diversity; it supports a society in which individuals recognize and validate differences within a community and balance multiple values.

Most of the initial scientific evidence indicates that affective polarization makes people more likely to ignore democratic norms.[126] Prejudice and dehumanization are independently associated with the desire to flout democratic norms to favor the in -group political party[127] and question the legitimacy of election results.[128] Eli Finkel and his colleagues use an experiment to show that a majority-party candidate in most US House districts—Democrat or Republican—could get elected despite openly violating democratic principles like electoral fairness, checks and balances, or civil liberties.[129] Voters' decisions to support such a candidate can only seem sensible if they believe the harm to democracy is marginally less than the consequences of an opposition party's victory. Some politicians have fueled this sense of threat by eliciting great emotion about their opponents, which psychologists suggest amplifies group dynamics. Fear, especially anxiety about death, converts mild in-group bias to out-group hatred and in-group loyalty.[130] Social norms against
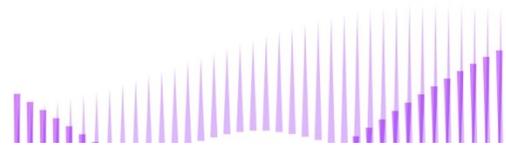
injuring others fade as people become willing to harm members of the out-group. As sectarianism has surged in recent years, so too has support for violent tactics.[131]

Two recent studies, however, raise questions about the connection between affective polarization and the weakening of democratic norms. In the first, Jan Voelkel and his colleagues find that depolarization techniques reliably reduce affective polarization, but that this reduction does not translate into reduced support for undemocratic practices, undemocratic candidates, or partisan violence. This finding indicates that the attitudes exist independent of one's feelings about members of other political parties.[132] The authors conclude that efforts to strengthen pro-democratic attitudes should target these outcomes directly, rather than focusing on affective polarization as a proxy. In another study, David Broockman and his colleagues similarly find no relationship between reducing affective polarization and a variety of outcomes, including support for legislative bipartisanship, support for democratic norms, and electoral accountability.[133] This research suggests that support for partisan violence is not rooted in partisan animosity but, rather, in other factors like anti-establishment beliefs, trait aggression, and a general inclination for violence.[134]

INTERVENTIONS

There is little social scientists can do to separate subgroups of people from the pervasive social, political, and media institutions that play an outsize role in intergroup conflict in order to advance pluralist goals. Indeed, even if researchers could do so for scientific purposes, pluralists could not roll back centuries of sorting, eradicate parties, or radically transform polarizing electoral institutions. Media organizations and the internet are largely beyond central control if free speech is to be protected. And perhaps more vexingly, research indicates that prejudice and nativism are resistant to persuasion and long-term change.[135] Quite simply, this social, political, and informational environment—which has been so detrimental to pluralism—is the unsteady ground upon which interventions must make progress.[136]

Interventions to promote pluralism principally aim for prejudice reduction that can facilitate the recognition and validation of differences that diverse democracies require to succeed. Political scientists and sociologists, who have long studied the impact of prejudice in public opinion, view prejudice as a function of pre-adult socialization,[137] ideology,[138] or conflict over scarce resources,[139] and they tend to treat prejudiced views as relatively unmalleable, at least in the short term.[140] These researchers are more likely to study the consequences of individual- and mass-level prejudice than models of prejudice reduction. Much of our knowledge here, therefore, has come from the work of psychologists, particularly studies focused on the effect of cross-boundary relationships (tests of "contact theory") and informational cognitive interventions.[141] This work overwhelmingly relies on lab- or survey-based framing interventions, thought experiments, or brief intergroup contact exercises, in which subjects are manipulated in ways that may produce marginal differences in their public attitudes. Political scientists have also extensively examined the effects of differences in political institutions but, for the reasons discussed earlier, institutional and structural disparities are very challenging to manipulate or control for the purposes of study. To be sure, social scientists broadly confront a number of methodological challenges across themes that limit the conclusions or policy implications we might draw from any given study.

A successful pluralistic, inclusive, and diverse democracy requires the development of competencies that allow Americans to move through everyday conflict without resorting to violence or exclusion. While enhancing these competencies and reinforcing a shared commitment to equality and inclusion can be achieved in various ways, social scientists have largely focused on two factors that undergird these goals: increasing tolerance for difference, and institutional design that shapes self-interest and individual behavior in ways that mitigate interpersonal and intergroup social conflict.

This circumscribed set of research explores the effects of treatments targeting three different social registers on intergroup tolerance and individual behavior.[142] A first set works to rewire people's perceptions of others by correcting misperceptions, recategorizing their classifications of subgroups, or directing their *thoughts* to focus on commonalities across differences. Some psychologists have also emphasized motivation, restraint, and cognitive interventions that empower individuals to fight off personal prejudice.[143] A second set places people with disparate backgrounds or ideologies into contact with one another to facilitate stronger *relationships* between them. And a third set responds to the challenges posed by contemporary American *institutions* by trying to alter people's relationships with them. These either target public discourse or structural changes that would correct regressive political incentives.

INTERVENTION ONE:
Thoughts

One prominent approach to prejudice reduction is to appeal to superordinate identities or shared values between two groups in order to reduce conflict and derision between the groups. Efforts to reduce partisan animus, for example, may seek to shift the salience of respondents' party identities such that they perceive out-partisans as fellow Americans—a superordinate identity shared by Democrats and Republicans— rather than as political competitors. Using a set of survey experiments, as well as a natural experiment that stemmed from the July Fourth holiday, Matthew Levendusky showed that when individuals' American identities were primed, they were 25% less likely to rate the other party at 0 degrees on a scale of warmth of feeling, and 35% more likely to rate the other party at 50 degrees or higher.[144] Researchers came to similar conclusions when they reminded individuals of their national identities—and shifted respondents away from divisive identities—by discussing the killing of Osama bin Laden.[145] Along the same lines, a recent mega-study of psychological interventions to reduce polarization found that highlighting shared cross-partisan identities was among the most effective tools in reducing partisan animosity.[146] Beyond adjusting individuals' categorization of fellow citizens, researchers have also experimented with correcting misperceptions about others. Results show that correcting views of party supporters reduces animus toward the other side.[147] Moreover, informing partisans that most out-partisans do not support breaking democratic norms reduces their willingness to break democratic norms themselves.[148] In fact, a field experiment that informed respondents that Muslim women disproportionately hold progressive gender attitudes reduced discrimination to zero.[149]

A particularly well-publicized technique is perspective-taking, which entails imagining an experience from the perspective of an outgroup member or recalling a similar situation from one's own experience.

Perspective-taking experiments have been conducted in both lab and internet settings, as well as in rigorous large-scale field experiments.[150] Field experiments that focused on reducing prejudice toward transgender individuals and undocumented immigrants, for example, demonstrated statistically significant effects that persisted for months.[151] Other studies have shown that perspective-getting, in which respondents hear from an outgroup member or others about the outgroup member's experiences, reduces prejudice toward undocumented immigrants in the US[152] and toward refugees and immigrant outgroups in Kenya.[153] There is also evidence that this exchange of narratives can reduce affective polarization.[154] Similar studies, however, advise that the effects of perspective exchanges depend on the conditions of the dialogue and the nature of group memberships, which may reflect problematic power asymmetries.[155]

The likely mechanism in these exchanges is the influence of personal experiences over facts and statistics. Emily Kubin and colleagues explain that because personal experiences are seen as truer than facts, they foster rationality in opponents, which in turn increases respect.[156] Not all personal experiences, however, are created equal. Kubin et al. find that the most effective personal experiences are those that are both relevant and involve harm—suffering or potential suffering—likely because much of morality is grounded in perceptions of harm. They note that personal experiences only have an advantage in moral disagreements; when disagreements are not moral in nature, facts promote respect just as well as experiences.

In a similar vein, "paradoxical thinking" is the attempt to change attitudes using new information that is consistent with subjects' beliefs but is more extreme. Seeing their beliefs taken to an extreme level allows individuals to paradoxically perceive their own beliefs as irrational or senseless. To explore the effects of paradoxical thinking, Boaz Hameiri and his colleagues transmitted messages to residents of a small Israeli city that were extreme but congruent with the ethos of conflict common among the city's predominantly right-wing and religious population. Even in the midst of a cycle of ongoing violence in the context of one of the most intractable conflicts in the world, the intervention led hawkish participants to decrease their support for conflict across time.[157] And compared with the control condition, hawkish participants that were exposed to the paradoxical thinking intervention expressed less support for aggressive policies as

violence escalated, and more support for conciliatory policies to end the violence.[158]

The persistent challenge with the application of these psychological interventions is that most of the experiments are conducted within largely controlled environments like university labs or internet survey applications. With the exception of some field experiments, exposure to the interventions is typically not accompanied by hyper-partisan, exclusionary, or disdainful rejoinders that might mimic today's public sphere. The US media, for example, primes partisan differences much more often than it primes a shared American identity.[159] Moreover, organic opportunities for perspective-taking and the communication of personal experiences—which often rely on intergroup encounters and extended conversations— are increasingly rare as Americans are subject to residential racial segregation,[160] residential partisan segregation,[161] and informational isolation on the internet.[162] The most successful of these tactics, including intensive door-to-door canvassing, are also very difficult to scale. Not only is it resource-intensive to train and manage canvassers, but also meaningful social change would likely require an army of canvassers.

INTERVENTION TWO:

Relationships

Contact theory is perhaps the most widely known and studied intervention aimed at reducing intergroup conflict and prejudice. Formalized in the 1950s by Gordon Allport, contact theory holds that contact between people from different social groups can promote tolerance and acceptance between them, particularly when certain conditions are met. These conditions include, among others, that the contact takes place between members of groups of equal status and that it is experienced in pursuit of common goals.[163] While researchers have identified additional criteria for intergroup contact experiences that effectively reduce prejudice, as well, a 2006 meta-analysis of more than 500 studies by Linda Tropp and Thomas Pettigrew found that contact alone is all that is needed for greater understanding—in all but the most hostile and threatening conditions.[164]

In other studies, researchers actively facilitate and choreograph relationships between people of different backgrounds to cultivate greater mutual understanding. These projects include a study that asked subjects to read an article about common ground between political parties and then discuss it with co-partisans and outgroup partisans,[165] a study that engaged university-age respondents in a workshop about how to bridge political divides,[166] a study that used online text-based discussion about issues,[167] and a study that urged respondents to engage in vicarious or imagined contact with out-partisans.[168] Another similar study found that integration policies shape intergroup relations by reducing socioeconomic and legal inequalities.[169] Each of these interventions was found to reduce hostility toward out-groups.

Related research examines the effect of observed intergroup contact between exemplars of two groups. In two experimental studies, Leonie Huddy and Omer Yair exposed subgroups of Americans to mock news stories about an observed interaction between Chuck Schumer, then the US Senate minority leader, and Mitch McConnell, then the Senate majority leader. The leaders discussed immigration matters, interacting in either a warm or hostile manner, and either independently compromising or failing to compromise.

In both studies, warm leader relations reduced affective polarization, but policy compromise did not.[170] Researchers indicate that the tone of political and social conflict could change if people can be persuaded to think of each other in more moderated terms.

While contact appears to offer one of the most promising paths toward greater pluralism in an increasingly diverse polity, a recent meta-analysis by Betsy Paluck, Seth Green, and Donald Green suggest that Tropp and Pettigrew's optimistic assessment of the evidence may be premature. In a re-analysis of exclusively high-rigor experiments, the authors found that the impact of contact varies, with interventions directed at ethnic or racial prejudice generating substantially weaker effects than those focusing on other characteristics, such as disability.[171] These authors emphasized that among the 27 randomized controlled experiments with delayed outcome measurement that they cover in the meta-analysis, none addressed *adults'* racial or ethnic prejudices. They conclude that, absent additional rigorous studies, the contact hypothesis should not be used to reliably guide policymaking or governance.[172]

Other relationship-based interventions include conflict resolution, deliberative democracy, and collective healing. Conflict resolution evaluation studies are largely targeted at two extremes: reducing conflict between children in a school-based setting and preventing violence during protracted social conflict. Meta-analyses suggest that school-based conflict resolution interventions are successful in reducing anti-social behavior, particularly among younger adolescents.[173] Conflict resolution interventions aimed at intractable conflicts like those in Northern Ireland or Rwanda are broader and generally involve tools like integrated negotiations, mediation, and constructive controversy methods, although research on the effectiveness of these methods is less thorough or conclusive,[174] and they have often failed to forestall or prevent genocidal violence.[175]

For communities already ravaged by intractable conflict, there is some evidence that collective healing interventions aimed at education, understanding, and empathy reduce trauma symptoms and increase warmth toward members of outgroups. Many of these studies have very small sample sizes, however,[176] and their trials often take place in the aftermath of civil wars. These environments, then, are not comparable to

the US today, despite some observers' worst fears. With origins in conflict resolution and collective healing, deliberative democracy—which promotes the socialization of people and state actors to new opinions—is also thought to be an efficient means to improve democratic institutions. Participatory deliberative democracy interventions have been shown to help groups in conflict to "hear the other side," decrease prejudice, and promote pluralism.[177]

Finally, researchers have explored the role of intergroup norms in shaping attitudes and behaviors. While norms exist within a grey zone between thoughts, relationships, and institutions, they are fundamentally practiced and enforced by peers. Perceptions of social norms, in particular, can explain a broad range of behavioral and attitudinal conformity within groups.[178] Ample research has shown, for example, that when individuals are told about the tolerant beliefs of their peers, they are motivated to align their own attitudes accordingly.[179] In one innovative study, Paluck, Shepherd, and Aronow (2016) showed that encouraging a small set of "popular" students to take strong public stances against conflict (e.g., bullying) within a school shaped perceptions of norms and substantially reduced subsequent cases of conflict.[180] It's not just perceived *peer* norms that matter, though; institutions can also shape perceived society-wide social norms. The 2015 Supreme Court ruling in favor of same-sex marriage, for example, changed perceptions of powerful social norms regarding the country's acceptance of gay people in the United States.[181]

INTERVENTION THREE:
Institutions

For decades, researchers have been conscious of how pluralism may be protected or undercut by the design and strength of public institutions—which, ideally, assemble the interests of constituencies across their differences. In tracing the decline of pluralism, observers have noted the balkanization of news media into ever more niche and slanted sources; the rise of non-membership NGOs that are often backed by single donors who are unaccountable to the public; the decline of unions; increases in socioeconomic inequality; and the deleterious effects of social media, which have atomized consumers of information, spread disinformation, nationalized (and therefore polarized) local politics, and incentivized journalists to move ever faster and focus more on the sensational. Accordingly, researchers have explored a number of solutions, including proportional representation, a ban on gerrymandering,[182] shifting state and local elections to coincide with the national cycle,[183] ending "right to work" policies,[184] expanding voter registration,[185] same day voter registration,[186] and mitigating the power of wealthy corporations to bankroll campaigns.[187]

Some researchers have focused, in particular, on altering the incentives presented to elites. Under the current political system, these incentives tend to reward behaviors that promote sectarianism and affective polarization. People have been found to be less divided after observing politicians treating opposing partisans warmly, and nonpartisan statements from leaders can reduce violence.[188] It is also thought that by eliminating the ability of individuals to make huge contributions, campaign finance reforms could mitigate the influence of ideological extremists. Similarly, a number of scholars argue that public officials would be incentivized to be less divisive if governments were to reduce partisan gerrymandering—which protects ideologically extreme candidates and officials from electoral challenges and limits competition in the

marketplace of political ideas. Such measures could have the spillover effects of moderating immigration attitudes and tranquilizing the identity politics that many politicians employ to motivate partisans to vote.[189]

At their best, public institutions also bring people into communication and interdependency with one another across social boundaries. Eric Klinenberg has championed the potential of what he calls "social infrastructure"—public facilities such as libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, athletic fields, and swimming pools—as vital parts of communities.[190] He includes sidewalks, regularly scheduled markets, courtyards, community gardens, and other green spaces that invite people into the public realm, along with community organizations like churches and civic associations that feature physical spaces where people can freely assemble. These places may also include the "third spaces" introduced by sociologist Ray Oldenburg: commercial venues like cafés, diners, barbershops, and bookstores where people are welcome to congregate and linger.[191] Klinenberg writes that attention to such infrastructure can alleviate contemporary problems like social isolation, crime, education, health, polarization, and climate change—and that neglect of this infrastructure can exacerbate such problems.[192]

Local newspapers are also thought to turn attention away from polarizing partisan battles over national issues and toward local matters subject to greater consensus and less ideological division. Joshua Darr and his colleagues tested this hypothesis when a local newspaper in California dropped national politics from its opinion page and filled the space with articles by local writers on local issues. After this quasi-experiment, the researchers showed that politically engaged people did not feel as far apart from members of the opposing party, compared to those in a similar community in which there was no change in the newspaper.[193] From 2005 to 2021, however, about 2,200 American local print newspapers closed, and between 2008 to 2020, the number of American newspaper journalists dropped by more than half.[194] This loss reveals not only the limitations of interventions focused on news publications, but also the transient nature of interventions that depend on institutions more broadly; they are subject to powerful structural and market factors that are challenging to alter, even when evidence suggests that doing so would promote pluralism and democracy.

In this review, we have tried to draw attention to the most rigorous evidence across different types of interventions. A review of the literature, however, would not be complete without addressing the challenges of drawing firm conclusions in this sphere. Many social scientific studies of interventions to promote pluralism are observational—not experimental—in their design. This observational design undermines confidence in the estimated size, direction, and causal nature of the effects that researchers identify. Furthermore, a rigorous meta-analysis of the literature on prejudice reduction by Betsy Paluck and her colleagues suggests that the knowledge heretofore generated in this field is skewed by publication bias; the balance of findings is tilted by researchers' and journals' decisions to largely publish studies with positive results.[195] Those studies that identify the largest effects often have the largest standard errors, suggesting that these findings may be false positives or were inflated by chance given small sample sizes. Meanwhile, studies that find null effects are rarely published. High-rigor studies on prejudice reduction—those with large samples, pre-registration and pre-analysis plans, precise and well-planned designs, and effective execution—tend to yield the smallest average effects. For perspective, these effects are five times smaller than the positive shift in feelings observed toward gay individuals in the United States in the past two decades. The drop in average study effects suggests that published prejudice reduction studies are disproportionately "those that show propitious (statistically significant) results, while studies with more disappointing or ambiguous results remain in file drawers."[196]

> In planning America's path back to pluralism, there remains a tremendous amount of room for social innovation, with many actors who are eager to pursue a fair, equal, and cooperative democracy.

Other factors also indicate that there are boundaries to contemporary knowledge. Across the board, most studies test interventions on college students, children, or less reliable online samples. We know far less about the effectiveness of these interventions in adults over 25 years of age.[197] As social scientists have concluded that prejudice is socialized in people's youth, we may expect far more marginal effects from experiments on adult populations. There has also been a divergence in the results of the high-rigor prejudice reduction studies between those examining attitudinal-based outcomes and those examining behavior-based outcomes. Targeted interventions appear better at changing discriminatory behavior than reducing negative stereotypes or outgroup animus.[198] In addition, we still know very little about the effectiveness of entertainment and mass media interventions. And despite the widespread adoption of diversity and cultural competence trainings, there is little rigorous evidence that they offer any benefit at all.[199] Finally, it is worth reiterating that new research suggests that affective polarization may not be the cause of anti-democratic behavior and attitudes. Dislike of opposing partisans doesn't automatically translate into opposition to democracy. Therefore, it is possible that trying to reduce partisan intergroup animus may make people feel warmer toward out-partisans but may have no effect on more critical threats to democracy.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The limitations of the literature we have reviewed point toward potential future research on how to promote pluralism. We organize our recommendations into four areas: study design, cross-field collaboration, context, and contact. In each area, we begin broadly and then narrow in on specific studies.

First, researchers should aim to field fewer small-scale studies. Instead, they should partner with funders and NGOs to invest in larger-scale, field-based, policy-relevant studies that use larger samples and pre-registered designs and that measure relevant attitudinal and behavioral outcomes at delayed intervals to assess decay of any observed effects. Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman's canvassing studies,[200] for example, provide a compelling framework for this sort of work.[201]

Second, we urge researchers to engage in cross-discipline collaborations. Scholars in various subfields are simultaneously researching tolerance and pluralism promotion, attempting to attenuate anti-immigrant attitudes, reduce racial prejudice, and quell partisan conflict. There is, however, little acknowledgement of the similarities of these research programs. The interventions that these scholars are developing and testing are more similar than different. While psychologists focus predominantly on the workings of the mind, political scientists and economists concentrate on power, structure, and institutions. Collaborations between these disciplines could yield interventions that are not just successful at increasing tolerance but are also reasonable to implement, scalable, resource-conscious, and replicable.

Third, a separate stream of research programs should aim to replicate promising interventions that we've highlighted above, but systematically vary outcomes, audiences, and research contexts (lab, field, survey) to better understand the conditions under which interventions work. The ultimate goal is to understand what intervention works, for which outcomes, among which audiences, and under what circumstances.[202] It's clear that a major limitation of our understanding of contact theory, for example, is the conditions under which it is effective and its application to Americans of all ages. We need to determine, for example, if all of Allport's conditions for contact to work are necessary to reduce prejudice, as well as the extent to which contact works to reduce prejudice in adults, whose attitudes are more firmly established and difficult to move than adolescents.

Because our review of the literature suggests that various forms of intergroup contact may yield some of the greatest benefits, our fourth and final recommendation is that researchers and funders target increased funding and intervention development specifically in this space. These studies should include samples of children *and* adults and include delayed measures of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes to assess the differential effects and decay of those effects. Researchers should also vary the conditions that Allport proposed were necessary for intergroup contact to yield prejudice-reducing effects (e.g., equal status, pursuit of common goals, sanctioned by institutional support). With this knowledge, we will have a clearer recipe for improving intergroup relations in the United States and elsewhere. Moreover, we will understand the potential benefits of bringing diverse groups together in schools, workplaces, and housing in ways that are not resource intensive, can be non-political, and are easily scalable.

Invest in large-sample field-based studies with and rigorous designs

Engage in more cross-disciplinary collaborations

Replicate existing interventions to understand what works, for which outcomes, among which audiences, and under what circumstances
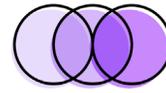
More research on intergroup contact with different populations and under different conditions

CONCLUSIONS

The state of pluralism in the United States today is bleak in numerous ways. Decades of immigration and plummeting white fertility are reshaping the nation's demographics, and there is evidence that previously dominant groups feel threatened by this shift. Political entrepreneurs, deeply familiar with the historical efficacy of racial appeals, have tapped into this discontent for political gain, further racializing American politics. In addition, the reshuffling of groups into distinct, identity-aligned political coalitions has heightened the stakes of political conflict; debates over ideas are now debates over the very identities, morals, and values that bring meaning to our lives. Political campaigns both reflect and fuel these trends. Politicians frequently frame their political opponents as deeply evil, driven not by service to their country but by a desire to destroy it. It's not surprising that many Americans are exasperated, and the nation's leading newspapers feature nearly daily lamentations about the nation's divisions.

Despite decades of progress on some of America's most vexing issues—including racial inequality—backlash and backsliding threaten these delicate gains. Further, the faith and trust that American citizens once held in political institutions to confront and solve big problems has nearly disappeared in this era of hyper-polarization. Some of the most problematic democratic backsliding is taking place in state legislatures, where increasingly nationalized parties hold super-majorities and are subject to fewer checks on their power.[203] Both Democrats and Republicans gerrymander to curtail the political power of their opponents, and some Republican state officials have sought to undermine free and fair elections.[204] As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have outlined, the mutual respect and forbearance necessary to blunt a slide into authoritarianism have all but disappeared in many states—and increasingly at the national level, as well.[205]

There are no easy solutions to the polarization among the most politically active Americans. As long as elected officials discern that the benefits of stoking division for political gain outweigh the political costs, we can

expect prejudiced rhetoric and anti-democratic reforms to occupy a central place in American politics. While some of the psychological tools we reviewed may reduce affective partisanship at the margins, we believe that most informational and cognitive interventions fall dramatically short of what we need at this time.

As unlikely as they may be, the most successful interventions to reduce polarization may involve reforming the nation's political institutions in order to alter current incentives to divide and demonize fellow citizens. Over 250 years, American politics have evolved to reveal the deficiencies of a single-member district, first-past-the-post system reliant on primary elections and voluntary voting; it incentivizes leaders to stir and mobilize their most ardent supporters—by any means necessary—to attract financial backing, secure partisan loyalty, and win office.[206] As a result, we believe, we have a self-reinforcing, "two party doom loop" that fuels division and intolerance across numerous domains.[207] To reduce the power of extreme political factions and grant power commensurate with electoral appeal, there is growing support for a variety of institutional reforms like ranked-choice voting, multi-member districts, fusion voting, mandatory voting laws, proportional representation, and campaign finance laws that severely limit contributions. Beyond the most local levels, however, the prospects for such reforms are bleak so long as they differentially harm one party over others. The United States may need to reach an untenable status quo for public pressure to catalyze the sorts of political changes that reduce division and promote pluralism.[208]

Still, we find some reason for hope and aspiration. A cursory look at the history of Civil War-era national and state politics reveals that racial and political authoritarianism is nothing new.[209] The post-war period of relative domestic peace, widely shared prosperity, and bipartisanship are not the norm but an exception to historical trends. Further, anti-pluralist attitudes are not held broadly by the general population. Rather, they are concentrated among the most partisan.[210] Most Americans are not overtly bigoted[211] and are not terrified by demographic change.[212] During Trump's presidency, for example, the number of Americans who said that immigration to the United States should be increased surpassed the number of Americans who said it should be decreased for the first time since the question was asked in 1965,[213] and the endorsement of anti-Black and anti-Latino stereotypes measurably dropped among both Democrats and Republicans during the same time period.[214]

Most Americans are also not deeply politically polarized; they do not hate out-partisans or support political violence or extreme policies.[215] In fact, a majority of Americans do not pay significant attention to politics, do not know much about politics, and are not particularly partisan or ideological.[216] The media handwringing over echo chambers or exposure to misinformation online, for example, appears to be premature. Research finds that most Americans aren't solely consuming ideologically-slanted news sites and that "fake news" is heavily produced and consumed by just a sliver of the population.[217] The future cannot hinge its hopes, however, on the apolitical. By their nature, they lack the voice and engagement to which democracies and markets respond.[218]

More promisingly, government and civil society groups can draw from social science research to design scalable programs aimed at reducing intergroup conflict. While some of the interventions discussed above show strong evidence-based potential (e.g., canvassers delivering intensive perspective-taking and perspective-getting), many are likely too resource-intensive to scale and require participants to

voluntarily alter their daily habits or thoughts to achieve change, inviting a collective action problem. Other interventions based on contact theory may be backed by weaker policy-relevant evidence but show significant potential, and they are far more scalable with buy-in from large government, non-government, and/or private institutions. Government policy aimed either explicitly or implicitly at managed integration can be paired with programs by civil society organizations that tweak programmatic design to bring diverse people together in managed interactions where participants are on equal footing and pursue shared goals.

Interventions that facilitate intergroup contact leverage the propensity of individuals to naturally seek common purpose and identify their common humanity amidst a cacophony of intersecting American backgrounds that are too diverse to simplify into divisive binaries. They also have the added advantage of "meeting people where they are," rather than requiring them to change the way they lead their lives. The most rigorous evidence of the benefits of contact reveals relatively small effects, and these benefits have only been found in younger populations. A marginal positive effect multiplied across millions of people in multiple contexts, however, could yield dividends in the medium- and long-term. In the meantime, the field needs scholars to evaluate the effect of meaningful intergroup contact in adult populations to better understand whether, when, and among whom these sorts of interventions reduce prejudice. Ultimately, there remains a tremendous amount of room for social innovation, with many actors who are eager to pursue the promise of a fair, equal, and cooperative democracy. An increasingly diverse America awaits.

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An argument that the relationship between immigration, unemployment, and support for the far right is more complex than indicated in other research, and that individual country effects persist even after many empirical controls.

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An examination of the factors that drive membership in the British National Party (BNP) utilizing a leaked membership list. The authors find that the probability that an individual joins the BNP increases in neighborhoods with a high proportion of non-white residents, but only if the neighborhood is residentially segregated.

Charitopoulou, Effrosyni, and Javier Garcia-Manglano, "Fear of Small Numbers? Immigrant Population Size and Electoral Support for the Populist Radical Right in Switzerland," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* **44 (2018): 849-869.**

An investigation of the relationship between the size of local immigrant populations and the vote share of the populist radical right (PRR) in Switzerland. The authors conclude that individuals in municipalities with a moderate proportion of foreigners are more likely than those in areas with fewer

or greater numbers of migrants to vote for the PRR.

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An evaluation of the neighborhood effects of support for the Dutch Freedom Party from 2010 to 2013 using multiple national surveys of the Netherlands. The authors find little evidence for a neighborhood effect, and no evidence for the proposed causal mechanisms.

Ford, Robert and Matthew Goodwin, "Angry White Men: Individual and Contextual Predictors of Support for the British National Party," *Political Studies* **58 no. 1 (2010): 1-25.**

A profile of the electoral base of support for the British National Party (BNP). The authors find that the BNP receives most of its support from middle-aged, working-class white men who are anxious about immigration, especially Muslim immigration from Pakistan or Africa.

Gest, Justin, *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* **(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).**

A book on findings from original surveys and full-immersion fieldwork among the white working-class people of once thriving industrial cities in the United States and Britain. The author makes the case that tension between the vestiges of white working-class power and its perceived loss has caused their radicalization.

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An examination of the role of stigmatized immigrants in support for the far-right Swiss People's Party, using data concerning support for the party. The authors find that threat perceptions of stigmatized immigrants, especially those from Albania and the former Yugoslavia, drive support for the radical far right.

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An examination of the home neighborhoods of candidates for the far-right Sweden Democrats between 2006 and 2010 to determine whether local changes in the immigrant population increased the chance that an individual became a party candidate. Using a variety of scoping conditions and controls, the authors find only null effects for local immigration on the probability that an individual became a party candidate.

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A description of regression models for individual- and national-level characteristics that could predict support for extreme right parties. These models use the Eurobarometer Surveys for 1988, 1994, 1997, and 2000. The authors conclude that the base of support for extreme right parties is constituted of young men with lower levels of education who harbor anti-immigrant attitudes and experience dissatisfaction with the political system.

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An examination of 430 Norwegian municipalities across six elections to analyze the sources of support for the right-wing Progress Party. The authors find that long-term institutional and party system variables had the strongest impact on the Progress Party's electoral fortunes.

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Germany 1989-1998," *European Sociological Review* 17 no. 4 (2001): 431-449.

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A comparison of the cultural or economic causes of support for the far right, using data from 11 European countries. The authors conclude that cultural ethnic threats are a stronger predictor than economic threats, but that higher GDP levels can reduce the ethnic threat.

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An analysis of 290 Swedish municipalities to discover the sources of support for the far-right Sweden Democrats. The authors find that support is largely determined by a higher unemployment rate, lower GDP per capita, and lower levels of education in the municipality.

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Endnotes

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5. See David Bateman, "The Dilemmas of Democratic Peoplehood," Working Paper, 2018.

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7. For a series of case studies from "majority minority" societies, see Gest 2022.

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This project was supported by

NEW PLURALISTS