Political coherence as a driver of interpersonal liking and ideological sorting

Keywords: Political psychology, Large-scale social experiments, Agent-based modelling, Sociopolitical patterns and dynamics, Integration of social data

Extended Abstract

The increase in political polarization has become a worrying concern in different countries (1, 2) as it is a threat to society and democracy itself (3). One recent event stands out from the multiple negative consequences of polarization: achieving a coordinated and effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic was hindered by political polarization as this social phenomenon exacerbates misinformation (4, 5) and conditions partisans' compliance to cooperation (6, 7). While it is common to talk about political polarization, we are often referring to multiple dimensions such as attitudinal polarization, outgroup animosity, segregation, and ideological sorting. For instance, ideological sorting refers to the fact that opinions are becoming more aligned across diverse and seemingly unrelated topics as people are becoming ideologically sorted in terms of partisanship (8–10). One standard explanation for these observed phenomena is that people prefer politically like-minded others, i.e., political homophily, as the preference for similar people biases judgments across multiple domains (11–14). However, while the liking-by-similarity effect stands as a largely accepted truth, other factors could also play an important role in the political domain.

In the present work, we hypothesized that, beyond the effect of similarity, interpersonal attraction depends on shared partisanship and ideological coherence. We performed three studies in different countries (Argentina, Portugal, and the USA) and found that people are more attracted to politically coherent ingroups rather than to those who hold ambivalent opinions (Fig. 1A). For example, a coherent Democrat would be pro-choice regarding abortion and also favor stricter gun control. First, we performed two large-scale social experiments in which more than three thousand participants were arranged in dyads, discussed five controversial topics, and completed an interpersonal attraction questionnaire. We observed and replicated that interpersonal liking increases as a function of similarity but also of ingroup-coherence (Fig. 1B). These results were validated by performing an online pre-registered experiment in which political coherence was experimentally manipulated. Overall, our results indicate that liking in the political domain may not be solely driven by homophily but by more complex notions of group affiliation such as ingroup-coherence.

Moreover, we were interested in addressing how this driver of interpersonal attraction relates to the macro-level patterns of political polarization and partisan-ideological sorting. For this endeavor, we developed a multidimensional agent-based model where polarization could arise in independent individual topics or as ideological states where opinions are sorted and correlated with each other. Furthermore, the model incorporates two empirical findings from social psychology: homophilic interactions, in which agents who share similar opinions are more likely to interact, and ingroup-coherence, in which agents are more attracted to coherent ingroups. Interestingly, by incorporating this last assumption, opinions become more aligned, and correlation patterns similar to those widely observed among political attitudes emerge. Additionally, we derived the model's master equation and performed numerical simulations obtaining identical results. The model's final states were compared with actual opinions from

multiple datasets (e.g., American National Election Studies) which include more than 20,000 standpoints on different controversial issues. By fitting the model's parameters to these data, we were able to replicate the opinions' distribution of every dataset and note that homophilic interactions alone could not explain the ideologically sorted states observed in the political domain. However, this gap could be addressed by taking into consideration ingroup-coherence favoritism (Fig. 2).

It has become imminent to find and implement solutions to the stark rise of political polarization because the increase in issue polarization, outgroup animosity, and ideological alignment, weakens our democracies. One key element of this mission is to understand the underlying social, political, and psychological mechanisms driving polarization. To do so, further combined efforts from experimental approaches, large-scale empirical studies, and theoretical modeling are crucial. In this direction, we found empirical evidence that ingroup-coherence drives interpersonal attraction in the political domain, and, by developing a multidimensional agent-based model, we observed that this phenomenon could explain the current levels of ideological sorting.

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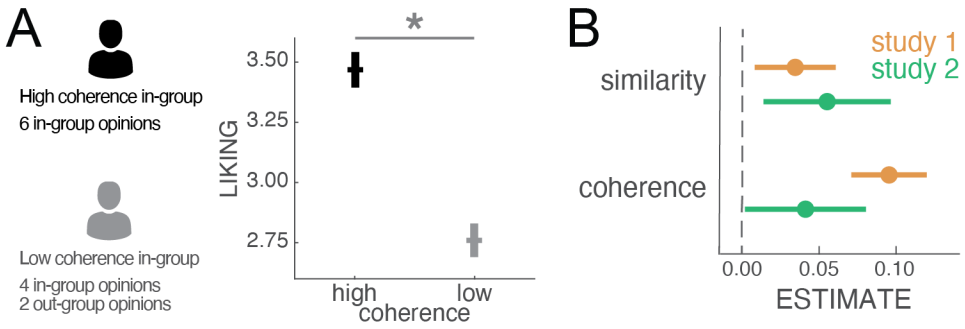

Figure 1. A) Across the three studies, high-coherence ingroup targets were rated more positively than the low-coherence ones. B) The estimates of the multivariate mixed model of liking as a function of similarity and coherence are shown in orange for study 1 and green for study 2.

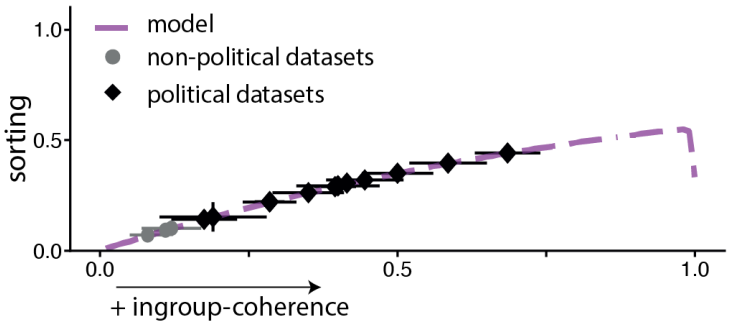

Figure 2. On one hand, the figure depicts the analytical solution of the agent-based model for different values of ingroup-coherence. Sorting values were computed as the final proportion of coherent agents and shown in purple. On the other, different datasets' mean sorting values were mapped to their corresponding model's parameters. Non-political datasets are shown in light gray and political ones in black.