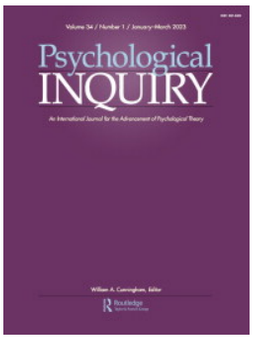

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REPLY

Resources and Partisanship: Response to Commentaries

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> "…I suppose what we all desire is to improve the condition of the people by whom we are employed, and to advance our country, or at any rate to save it from retrogression."
>
> "That of course."
>
> "So much is of course. I give credit to my opponents in Parliament for that desire quite as readily as I do to my colleagues or to myself. The idea that political virtue is all on one side is both mischievous and absurd. We allow ourselves to talk in that way because indignation, scorn, and sometimes, I fear, vituperation, are the fuel with which the necessary heat of debate is maintained."
>
> –Anthony Trollope (1876), *The Prime Minister*

We thank all the commentators for their diligent and thoughtful efforts on our article. The detailed and scholarly work by several of them went far beyond the call of duty, which was most gratifying. In this brief response, we seek to articulate what can be learned from them and to resolve some misunderstandings.

Our article was motivated by the recognition that partisan hostility has increased in recent years, particularly in the United States of America (USA). We thought social psychologists might be well positioned to seek ways of reducing the conflict, given the field's accumulated expertise regarding human interactions and group processes. Judging by these commentaries, we were perhaps overly optimistic about social psychology's potential for promoting social harmony in this fashion. Indeed, only the Aquino et al. (this issue) commentary took up the theme of how to reduce partisan conflict.

Alternation in Power

Aquino et al. (this issue) seemed to think that we were advocating alternation in power as a strategy. We did not actually intend to recommend anything more than a recognition that alternation in power, and sometimes sharing of power, seem to be the stable norm in the most flourishing countries. (We thought the different contributions of leftists and rightists might explain why alternation or sharing of power would become the equilibrium.) Thus, we propose more along the lines of recognizing the fact and perhaps appreciating its potential value than advocating that institutions should be modified to increase alternation. We were not advocating structural reform but rather seeking to find ways that politicians on the left and on the right might come to disagree more respectfully.

The alternative suggested by Aquino et al. (this issue) is moderation. We like that too. If politicians of all stripes could be encouraged to "chill out" and accept moderate views, then perhaps destructive extremes could be avoided. Yet how to achieve it? Again, we were not advocating structural change to increase alternation and/or sharing of power, though that seems to work fairly well. But we respectfully challenge these thinkers to consider recommendations for structural reform to increase moderation. Structural forces have pushed in the opposite direction, toward greater polarization. For example, gerrymandering has spread and increased, and both parties participate in re-drawing voting districts to get more homogenous districts. The result is that many congressional seats are largely uncontested, and so winning the primary election is often the main hurdle to taking political office. Winning the primary typically means appealing to the more extreme voters in one's own party. The much-remarked gradual disappearance of political moderates from Congress is partly a result of this. Indeed, in the USA, only the Senate remains immune to gerrymandering. The disappearance of citywide newspapers, which had a financial incentive to appeal to both sides, is another contributing factor, and online news sources increasingly cater to either left or right but not both. The polarization of news consumption is another new structural obstacle to moderation. Especially since the selective exposure literature suggests that people read news sources that agree with their initial views and avoid news sources that disagree with their views and therefore create cognitive dissonance (e.g., Metzger, Harsell, & Flanagin, 2020), creating "echo chambers" (e.g., Garrett, 2009).

Thus, we agree with Aquino et al. (this issue) that moderation by all parties would probably be better for a society than the alternation in power that is the general pattern. But in practice, perhaps, it is easier to achieve alternation in power than widespread moderation.

Other commentators (Crawford, this issue; Smith, this issue) noted that alternation in power is hardly ideal and could contribute to polarization, especially insofar as one government seeks to erase and reverse whatever its predecessor on the other side did. This could be true. Unfortunately, the USA may be headed in that direction.

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Some changes are difficult to reverse, however. One side can instill policies that cannot be retracted when the opposition takes power. A particularly compelling example is government entitlement programs. As elucidated in Cogan's (2017) recent history of such programs in the USA, the typical pattern is for these programs to be expanded when government has ample funds but never cut back when money is tight. Although eligibility criteria are typically on a continuum, policy requires a cutoff, leaving some disgruntled people who fall just short of eligibility and will make a reasonable case for the unfairness of their exclusion. Eventually the legislature agrees and moves the cutoff so as to include these individuals—but then creates a new category of people who just barely fail to qualify, and who will argue for the unfairness of the new dividing line. Meanwhile, of course, the people who fall just barely on the good side of the cutoff never complain that giving them benefits is unfair.

Another potential downside of alternation in power can occur if the currency is debased by overspending. As Crawford (this issue) notes, we are not economists ourselves, and so we take no position on Modern Monetary Theory and its tenet that the government can spend far more than it takes in without incurring any damage. We suspect that this is an issue on which left and right will disagree, with those on the right thinking that deficit spending will eventually lead to disaster, while those on the left thinking it will not. By coincidence, during the preparation of this response, we read an interview with a prominent anti-Trump conservative thinker, op-ed columnist George Will.[1] Holding to the traditional conservative line that chronic overspending and ever expanding government debt will eventually lead to a crash, he went so far as to suggest that today's politicians on both left and right form a self-interested class and collude to continue to run huge government deficits—partly because, as mostly old people, the politicians in charge cynically assume that any eventual economic crash caused by their current overspending will occur after they themselves are gone from the scene, so it will be someone else's mess to clean up. If he is correct, then sharing of power may work better than alternation. We note that the last time the USA federal government balanced its budget was during the late years of the Clinton administration, in which, for the first time in half a century, the country had a Democrat as president and a Republican dominated Congress. When they alternate, to put it simplistically, Republicans are able to reduce taxes without reducing spending, and the Democrats are free to increase redistributionist spending without raising taxes, and so both parties end up increasing the national debt. As we said, though, there is room for debate as to whether that will be a problem or not.

Elaboration of Our Theory

We appreciate Sheehy-Skeffington and Thomsen's (this issue) elaboration of our basic idea with fascinating and important additional material, including the relational schemas proposed by Fiske (1992) and abundant research, including their own, on how fairness and moral judgments are seen among babies. Their point that people on the political right tend to use market-pricing relational schemas, whereas those on the left use communal ones, is highly consistent with our analysis and adds a powerful psychological dimension. Modern conservatives favor open economic markets, which as we noted increase inequality by economic incentives but increase the society's total wealth. The left's emphasis on redistribution is best served by communal norms.

To be sure, having different relational schemas is not itself likely to be a cause of partisan hostility, but it helps elucidate why mutual understanding is so difficult to obtain. Or, as they put it, "stark ideological conflict [spreads] while everybody is nevertheless convinced that universal morals and justice support their particular partisan point of view" (this issue, p. 35). Having different, incompatible assumptions about how people basically relate to each other could certainly increase partisan hostility.

The evidence provided by Sheehy-Skeffington and Thomsen (this issue) about infant cognitions and expectations also fits well with the evolutionary analysis. We were particularly struck by the point that infants expect more resources to go to the agents who contributed more efforts. This is the traditional meaning of equity, and it is central not only to market economies but also to almost any incentive system. Human infants have presumably not had the opportunity to be socialized into market ethics and incentive systems. That suggests humans are born with at least innate preparation to accept unequal but equitable rewards.

China as an Exception

Reyna et al. (this issue) correctly note that China does not fit well into our analysis. Unlike most of the flourishing countries we mentioned, it has not had alternation in power, and indeed the Chinese Communist Party has been fully in charge continuously since 1949. During this time, its population has expanded considerably, and so if we use population growth as a measure of success, China has flourished under one-party rule.

China's population growth would seem in particular to be an advertisement for leftist politics, given that the ruling party is officially left-wing (communist). As Chinese colleagues have explained to us, however, the system is less firmly on the left than it seems. Although the government continues to play an active role in the economy, it is not nearly as left-wing as it was during, say, the communal farming project during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1963), during which millions died and the total population declined. Deng Xiaopeng's economic reforms began to let a private sector flourish. The collapse of European Communism in 1989 coincided roughly with China's crackdown on dissent after the Tianenmen Square protests, and so market-friendly reforms stalled but then were revived,

[1] https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-the-right-turned-left-parties-democracy-progressive-conservative-capitalism-marx-history-11675452169.

possibly because the analyses by the Chinese government led them to think that rising standards of living could satisfy the population enough to allow the party's government to avoid the fate of the Europeans. As a result, it began to tolerate market capitalism in increasing doses. The partially freed economic marketplace did increase resources overall. Our impression from reading the news reports over decades is that there have been alternating periods of freeing up the private sector and clamping down on it. This may accomplish something similar to what alternation in power in a flourishing democracy achieves.

Nevertheless, Reyna et al. (this issue) are correct that China has not had alternation in power, and one-party rule has presided over a substantial increase in population as well as a rise in standards of living. It is clearly an exception to our generalization that alternation in power is generally the stable equilibrium in most flourishing countries. Whether the past half century of Chinese governance offers an appealing role model for other countries to copy is an interesting question on which we take no position. The link between alternation in power and national flourishing certainly has exceptions.

Clarifications

Despite this helpful observation about China, the Reyna et al. (this issue) commentary is marred by confusion and contradiction, as well as a few mistakes. Possibly some of their confusion arises from conflating amassing and stockpiling resources. In the modern world, those two functions are interlinked (though still not the same), but through most of human evolutionary history, they were quite different. In particular, hunting-gathering nomads had few means of *storing* resources—but they were highly motivated to get resources, starting with their daily food. As early humans moved out of the tropics, they did gradually get better at storing, partly because food does not spoil as fast in cold weather, and partly because it was important to save food for hungry days in the deep winter.

Another misunderstanding by Reyna et al. (this issue) was attributing to us some kind of inner drive toward population increase. Their argument appears to fall into one of the less credible forms of group selection, proposing that hunter-gatherer groups were motivated to limit their population to stay in balance with nature. Abundant evidence indicates that any animal that lowers its own reproduction to benefit the group will soon remove its genes from the gene pool (Williams, 1966). The hunter-gatherers did not commit infanticide because they wanted to avoid population increase. Rather, they were essentially cutting their losses when they would be unable to feed the extra child (or when the baby seemed not healthy enough to survive anyway). When food was ample, the population increased. There are different opinions as to whether life was better among nomads or settled farmers (e.g., Graeber & Wengrow, 2021), but farming could produce more food per square kilometer than hunting and gathering, and so the population increased.

The characterization by Reyna et al. (this issue) of hunter-gatherers as nonviolent is disingenuous. Ample evidence (reviewed by Pinker, 2011) confirms that many early humans died violent deaths, proportionally far more than in today's world despite the proliferation of lethal weapons with the march of technology. Their claim that hunter-gatherers did not engage in large-scale warfare is merely a result of the fact that they lived in small groups. The small groups were sufficiently warlike.

Stereotypes and Bias

Psychology has devoted ample study to issues of prejudice, bias, and stereotyping. These are not all quite the same, however. According to the authoritative literature review by Jussim (2012), for example, most stereotypes are often accurate, so it is incorrect to speak of bias and distortion. The biggest exception Jussim found, however, is political stereotypes. People on the opposing sides of the political spectrum routinely distort and demonize their opponents, take extreme cases as typical, and the like.

Some relevant evidence was provided by the Pew Foundation's (2019) survey[2] of the American public, which asked Democrats and Republicans to respond to a host of issue questions—and also asked them to predict how the average Democrat and the average Republican would respond. This method enabled them to assess accuracy of stereotypes, by comparing, for example, what the average Democrat actually believes against what the average Republican thinks the average Democrat believes. Jussim's (2012) conclusion on the relative inaccuracy of political stereotypes was strongly supported: There was plenty of bias and distortion all around. For example, the proportions holding extreme views were barely more than half what their opponents thought. More relevant to the present argument, however, the degree of distortion was not uniform. Some groups distorted more than others. Two categories of people showed the highest amount of bias and distortion in characterizing their political opponents.

One category of people is highly relevant to the comments by Smith (this issue) and other commentators. Republicans with the lowest level of education (high school or less) showed severe distortions. These were mostly poor people, and so one might expect that their natural allies would be the Democrats, but apparently they so misunderstand what the Democrats stand for that they vote against them. The commentators noted that some people vote against their economic self-interest. These people are a particularly interesting case, in which poor and uneducated people vote for the party that has traditionally been less generous in advocating redistribution to the poor. Why? As Smith (this issue) points out, it is because of other values. Vance (2016) provided a firsthand personal description of life among such people, and one strong message was that, despite their personal problems, they felt some substantial amount of love and pride for their country. They saw,

[2]https://perceptiongap.us/?mod=article_inline.

possibly correctly, that Republicans have a more positive attitude than the Democrats toward the USA. As we suggested in our target article, this difference seems deeply rooted in the policies and attitudes of left and right: The right sees more positive value in the current social arrangement and hesitates to take steps to disrupt it, whereas the left sees the current society as hopelessly flawed and pushes for sweeping change. The perceived riskiness of major change is obviously much less when one perceives the status quo negatively rather than positively.

The Pew Foundation's survey findings are also relevant regarding the second category of people that showed the highest level of distortion, namely Democrats with advanced educational degrees. That includes most university professors and social scientists. This finding was shocking and humbling to us when we encountered it, because we had believed that social scientists, despite certainly having some political preferences, would be more objective and accurate than others. Indeed, it is doubly humbling because even if one can convince oneself that professors and scientists were not the ones holding the distorted stereotypes, one must still concede that what the broad category of "Democrats with advanced degrees" has in common is having spent many years at universities, being taught by Democrats with advanced degrees.

Our efforts to understand both the political left and right from the inside was partly driven by the humbling recognition of this pervasive bias. As we noted at multiple points in our target article, we strove to remain neutral and treat both sides equally. We were pleased to see several of the commentators adopted a rigorously neutral, unbiased stance, similar to what we sought to do. In particular, the analyses by Skeehy-Skeffington and Thomsen, Aquino et al., and Smith (all this issue) all showed this effort. The other two, however, were more one-sided, indeed seeming to use their commentaries partly as an opportunity to vent their own dislike of the political right.

Our Theory Does Not Seek to Explain Everything

The format of target article and responses has great potential for developing new ideas. We are veterans of these exchanges, both by authoring multiple target articles in various journals, by authoring many commentaries, and (for one of us, years ago) as serving co-editor-in-chief of this very journal. In the best cases, target authors offer an intriguing new idea, and commentators build bridges to their work or others to elaborate and improve the idea. Commentary authors can also spot weaknesses in the target article and offer constructive solutions. Although this is the ideal, in this case we had hoped for more constructive engagement. Instead, some expressed their dismay at the very idea that conservatives have any valid points or contributions to society, and others developed alternative aspects of political activity that had little or no relation to our analysis.

In our target article, we tried to make clear that we were not claiming to explain all political behavior, or even all political sentiments and processes. We do not see our theory as contradicting other theories. Political behavior is highly complex.

A particular issue, raised by several commentaries (e.g., Smith, this issue; Crawford, this issue), was that some people vote against their economic self-interest. The cliché that people vote their pocketbooks has long been recognized by political scientists as at best only a small part of voting behavior, and it must at best be placed alongside other motivations, especially the "morality politics" described by Smith (this issue, p. 45). Although some commentators caricatured our position as if we thought all voting was driven directly by financial self-interest, we took great pains to avoid saying that. If anything, we sought to suggest that the divergent roles in the economic system leads to different voting patterns, not directly by pursuit of personal financial gain (though we do think that is never entirely absent) but by their impact on general perspective, including moral values.

The biggest lesson from the assembled commentaries is thus completely consistent with one of our key points. Political behavior, from voting to protest rioting, has multiple determinants. The theory we proposed was intended to be one factor among many. If we somehow failed to make that clear, we wish to take this opportunity to restate it. The differential emphasis on amassing vs. redistributing resources is not the only basis driving political partisan hostility.

Nevertheless, we continue to think this difference is an important factor contributing to mutual misunderstanding between the left and the right. And we continue to hope that recognizing that both left and right have some valid points and make important contributions to society's welfare is potentially one of the few and best available ways to reestablish respectful disagreement as a viable and desirable alternative to the mutual exaggeration and demonization that are all too common.

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