ABSTRACT

As of late, political theory, research, and practice have taken a deliberative turn, extolling the benefits of public discourse guided by norms such as inclusion, respect, and open-mindedness. Can these ideals, though, be approximated in the current era of partisan polarization? If so, what factors contribute to high quality, productive discourse?

These are the questions this project addresses, assessing how partisanship and polarization impact the public’s propensity to adopt the key deliberative attitude of reciprocity (or mutual respect) towards political argumentation. Drawing on social identity theory, the project conceptualizes partisan attachment as containing interrelated, yet separate ideological and social identity dimensions. Through a series of survey experiments, it then shows that partisan social identity attachment—in other words, the extent to which one views being a Democrat or a Republican as an important part of “who one is”—weakens one commitment to reciprocity in a variety of ways. Partisans with strong social identity attachments are more likely to heed party cues, as opposed to argumentative substance, in considering whether to afford reciprocity towards political disagreement. Partisans with strong social identity attachments are also less likely to support displays of reciprocity by an inparty political representative. The same effects, however, are not present for partisans with strong ideological commitments to their party. Moreover, the effects are not weaker for partisans who have regular social contact with outparty members.
Recent research shows that the partisan public has increasingly polarized not based on ideology or issue positions, but based on growing negative outparty affect and cross-party social distance. The research here thus shows that mass “social” polarization is creating a fundamental barrier to productive cross-party discourse, one that will need to be addressed if we want to establish a more deliberative democracy.