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Political aspects of shared reality

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The political world permeates people's everyday experiences. In this article, we review recent research concerning how the pursuit, creation, and maintenance of shared reality underlie important political phenomena. We address three general points. First, we discuss how the desire to share reality shapes the political attitudes that people adopt. Second, we outline how the existence of competing representations of reality can lead to prolonged political conflicts that are challenging to overcome. Third, we consider how and why shared reality contributes to social stasis and change. A scientifically informed understanding of how shared reality shapes the political arena will enrich psychological research and facilitate addressing social issues.

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2018, **23**:11–14

This review comes from a themed issue on **Shared reality**

Edited by **Gerald Echterhoff** and **Tory Higgins**

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.11.004>

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In June of 2017, Ivanka Trump — daughter of US President Donald Trump — stated that she tries to 'stay out of politics' [1]. This quote suggests that political aspects of the world are readily separable from people's personal lives and everyday experiences. However, political values and norms permeate how people perceive and engage with the world (e.g. whether to give money to a homeless person on the street). Developing political values and actively engaging with one's society necessitates that people construct a mutually shared understanding — or 'shared reality' — about the system in which they live. Here, we review recent research concerning how the creation and maintenance of shared reality is fundamental to important political phenomena. In particular, we focus on research documenting how shared reality contributes to the political attitudes that people adopt, the development and resolution of political conflict, and the occurrence of political stasis and change.

All people, to some degree, value having structure, order, and certainty in their daily lives, and seek out social verification for their understanding of the world (e.g. [2]). A rich history of research has documented that sharing reality functions to serve these psychological needs. Specifically, developing shared reality creates predictability in people's everyday lives, fosters a sense of certainty (rather than fleeting subjectivity) in people's attitudes, and facilitates social interactions [3,4]. The political realm can be particularly complex and ambiguous, and encompasses issues far removed from people's everyday experiences (e.g. war in foreign countries). As such, it should come as no surprise that constructing shared reality plays an important role in the political world [5*].

Shared reality and political attitudes

Shared reality that is constructed and maintained through governments, political groups, and close others informs people's political attitudes. First, consider that governments and political elites have the ability to shape people's attitudes in a 'top-down' manner through crafting a shared understanding of political contexts [6]. Governments create founding documents, which are composed of ideas that generate a working understanding of shared principles within a society. For example, the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights in the United States guide which principles are central to citizens' attitudes about a society (e.g. free speech is beneficial) [7].

Although these types of documents provide a culturally shared guide of society, they do not give people a concrete understanding of every ambiguous political situation (e.g. under what conditions should people be able to own guns?) and frequently do not directly address contentious political issues (e.g. should a woman be able to terminate an unwanted pregnancy?). Nevertheless, individuals are highly motivated to feel that they have found the 'right' answer to these types of questions. People typically do not have the time or knowledge to read policy proposals (e.g. the hundreds of pages of the Affordable Care Act) and often lack personal experience with the issue at hand. As a result, people turn to their political groups and close others in their lives, who act as 'epistemic providers' in forming a socially shared and grounded understanding of the issue at hand [8,9].

How do political groups influence attitudes? Many people identify with a particular ideological label that has shared meaning within a society (e.g. as 'liberal' or 'conservative') and join a political party. Political parties develop platforms that guide exactly what the definitions

are of different ideological labels, and that also shape the rhetoric of party leaders [10]. In turn, political parties and ideological labels guide what attitudes people embrace [11,12]. For example, liberals and conservatives reported holding an attitude toward welfare reform that was consistent with what their political party (Democrats and Republicans, respectively) ostensibly endorsed [13], and this occurred even when people *explicitly* rejected a political party (i.e. they identified as ‘Independent’) but *implicitly* identified with a party [14**]. Importantly, people changed their attitudes to be consistent with their party’s stances even when the attitude clashed with their personal values (e.g. liberals adopting a stringent welfare policy), indicating that people will forgo consistency in their personal values for the sake of maintaining shared reality.

People also turn to close others in their lives to develop a shared understanding of the political arena. For example, young children tune their general ideas about the organization of society and groups (e.g. Why are there different racial groups? Should economic hierarchy exist?) to be consistent with those of their parents [15**]. Additionally, people in all stages of life update their specific political attitudes (e.g. who to vote for in an election) to be consistent with those that their parents, friends, and social networks hold [5*,16**,17]. In turn, they form a sense of shared reality and experience certainty in their attitudes about the political world.

In addition to the attitudes of ingroups and close others shaping the beliefs that people form about political issues, the attitudes that outgroup members hold also impact people’s perspectives on the political world. Political outgroups, especially those that are perceived as being psychologically distant from the self, are often viewed as crafting oppositional and inaccurate representations of reality [9,18]. These counter narratives are perceived as threatening the credibility and legitimacy of a shared political worldview. For example, people view media narratives created by outgroup members as strongly biased and hostile toward their own group [19], which fuels negative outgroup attitudes and partisan hostility [20]. In turn, people are motivated to contrast away from the values and ideas of the outgroup, and this motivation can be a stronger predictor of the values that people embrace than is the desire to conform to and share the values of the ingroup [21].

The continual pursuit of social verification and shared reality for political attitudes can also shape the way that people engage with politically like-minded others. People are increasingly moving to communities that reflect and reinforce their political values [22,23,24*], and primarily engage with politically like-minded others on social media (e.g. Twitter) [25,26]. As a consequence, people are becoming more polarized in their political

attitudes [27], which some argue may be corrosive to a collective society. Polarization is occurring most strongly among ‘political elites’ who remain continually informed of the socially produced and shared ideas from political parties and news networks [28*]. In addition to people becoming more polarized, individuals perceive political outgroup members as holding even *more extreme and polarized* views than they actually do [29,30*]. Perceived and actual polarization results in citizens being less motivated to listen to ideas that contrast with their own and reach across the metaphorical aisle in society.

Although the pursuit of shared reality in the political world can drown out the desire to hear alternative viewpoints, it can also motivate action. People who have become polarized and adopted extreme attitudes are more likely to participate in the political system (e.g. voting, running for office) [31]. Additionally, perceiving or highlighting the shared nature of attitudes and behaviors (e.g. voting) in one’s social networks leads to increased feelings of political efficacy within one’s groups (e.g. the Democratic party) [32] and motivates political behavior [33,34]. Political participation is a central aspect of governments engaging with citizens and, generally speaking, maintaining a flourishing society, suggesting a potential upside to a more polarized electorate.

Shared reality and political conflict

Generally speaking, people tend to dislike individuals whose political beliefs are opposed to and challenge their own [35*,36]. When faced with worldviews that challenge one’s own, people readily defend their beliefs, sometimes to extreme ends. Specifically, the desire to achieve and maintain shared reality contributes to the emergence of large scale political conflicts. A clash of belief systems in which groups possess a distinct understanding about the world can escalate into conflicts that are filled with violence and disruption to people’s lives [37]. For example, in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, each side possesses a worldview or ‘narrative’ that is shared among its members and that frequently paints the outgroup as adversarial and challenging the fundamental tenants of one’s beliefs [38]. Perhaps more troubling, shared belief systems and narratives that perpetuate political conflict are disseminated to children at a young age through textbooks and school lessons [39], and inform people’s opinions of the way the world *ought* to be [40,41]. Additionally, given the epistemic and relational functions that shared narratives serve, adult citizens censor information that would insert cracks into the hegemonic construction of reality (e.g. by omitting controversial geopolitical events from news) [42].

Political conflicts are in part created through discrepant constructions of reality coming into competition. In turn, the development of peace and cooperation requires developing a shared understanding of values and ideas.

Importantly, experimental procedures that increase the consideration of opposing worldviews or render globally shared values accessible can reduce polarization on contentious political issues (e.g. the construction of the ‘Ground Zero Mosque’) [43*,44,45]. These types of psychological strategies and mindsets might prove fruitful in understanding how to promote political cooperation across ideological divides.

Shared reality and political change

The desire to create and maintain shared reality also impacts political stasis and change. Producing political change frequently requires challenging widely shared ways of thinking about the structure of a society. For example, promoting immigration reform requires combating the shared images (i.e. the prototype) that people possess about what citizens in a given country ‘look like’ [46], and promoting same-sex marriage requires advocating to change the socially shared conceptualization of marriage [47]. However, there are strong psychological barriers that people face when challenging dominant narratives and beliefs that are culturally shared. For example, individuals who raise dissent can experience social isolation and exclusion, a relatively universal outcome that occurs among both children and adults [48]. In turn, people who can tolerate (and even prefer) standing apart from the crowd appear to be most inclined to grasp onto politically subversive belief systems that challenge shared ideas. For example, people who reported a strong ‘need for uniqueness’ indicated greater support for women’s and gay rights [49], and reported being more politically liberal in general (i.e. more likely to challenge the status quo and commonly held ways of thinking) [50].

Conclusion

Here, we have reviewed recent research concerning how the pursuit of shared reality undergirds important phenomena in the political sphere, including the political attitudes that people adopt, the development and maintenance of political conflict, and the promotion of social stasis and change. In the domain of attitude development, the desire to obtain and maintain shared reality leads individuals to endorse ideas that are considered to be foundational to their society. People also rely on political organizations and close others to develop a clear and certain understanding of how they view political issues. Seeking out social verification for one’s worldview contributes to an increasingly polarized society, but also facilitates political participation and action. In the domain of political conflict, culturally shared narratives that compete to define the reality of a society can lead to conflicts that appear intractable. However, strategies that focus both sides on globally shared goals and ideas may help to facilitate cooperation. In the domain of political change, challenging a dominant worldview can lead to social exclusion, and individuals who are motivated to

individuate themselves and stand out as unique might be most oriented toward bucking hegemonic ideologies.

Societies continually grapple with novel political issues, and conflicts that result in social unrest and violence are historically ubiquitous. A scientifically formed understanding of the political world remains persistently relevant. Political belief systems and ideologies guide people’s everyday understanding of the world, imbue it with a sense objectivity, and motivate people into action. As such, directly investigating the role of basic psychological motivations to create and maintain shared reality is vital both to enriching our scientific understanding of the political arena, as well as for developing a fully comprehensive perspective of how psychological science can be employed to address pressing political issues.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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- of special interest
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