

The Extremism Cycle: False beliefs, social identity and cognitive dissonance

Joel Cooper

Princeton University

The polarization of political and social attitudes has become a significant threat to society. Compromise has become untenable, not only between political parties but also among social groups. Society's problems are increasingly seen as the responsibility of outgroups while actions by ingroup members are reinterpreted or ignored. Although polarization and extremism have always existed, the prospect of compromise in today's society is becoming increasingly rare. The chapter will begin with the observation that what people accept as facts are more nearly social communications. Truth Social and X, for example, are only platforms. It is people who generate and spread misinformation on those platforms, leading to the dissemination of different "facts" to different people. The bonds that hold political and social groups together have become more brittle, requiring increasing adherence to attitude orthodoxy. As social identity theory has taught us, our very identities and our self-esteem depend on our group membership and acceptance. To disagree with the orthodoxy is to risk expulsion from one's social group. However, as beliefs become more extreme, they begin to test the boundaries of reality and rational thinking, setting up the inconsistency that arouses cognitive dissonance. Dissonance exacerbates the rush to extremism as people seek to reduce the drive caused by the conflict of social media-generated beliefs with a more dispassionate view of reality. The chapter will conclude with some recommendations to break the extremism cycle.