

Anti-Bigotry Extremism and A Possible Antidote

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Political extremism refers to beliefs that most people within a society oppose. Our focus is on anti-bigotry racist extremism in the U.S. One might think, simplistically, that bigotry is bad so that being against bigotry is inherently good. However, the devil is always in the details. Some anti-bigotry rhetoric is so extreme that it includes condemnations of capitalism, merit, and objectivity. Other rhetoric wildly overstates the power and extent of bigotry or defines bigotry as beliefs that are both defensible and which many people hold. We report two experiments on the effects of anti-bigotry extremist rhetoric. Study One (N=423, Rutgers student sample) examined effects of an essay based on the anti-racist rhetoric of Ibram Kendi and Robin DiAngelo (e.g., declaring capitalism, merit and objectivity racist), and compared it to an essay on growing corn. Key results were that the Kendi and DiAngelo rhetoric produced a *hostile attribution bias*. After reading the summary of an interaction between a college admissions officer and an applicant (race of each unspecified), participants learned that the applicant was rejected. Key results were that participants claimed the admissions officer committed more microaggressions and more harm to the applicant, and that the admissions officer was more biased after reading the Kendi/DiAngelo essay than the corn essay. In Study Two (N=3355, national sample) some participants read an essay summarizing some of the anti-anti-semitism rhetoric produced by the Anti-Defamation League declaring, among other things, that there has been an “explosion” of anti-semitism in America that is like a “Charlottesville every day” and equating anti-Zionism with anti-semitism. This was compared to several alternatives, including one emphasizing shared, universal human values and affirming people’s ability to know right from wrong. The ADL essay elevated feelings of anger, being accused, manipulated, and produced more toxicity and fifteen times as many anti-semitic comments in open ended responses. Messages affirming shared human values reversed this trend. They produced no toxicity, were rated more meaningful, less exaggerated and were perceived as less biased than the ADL rhetoric. Although we are not suggesting that emphasizing shared humanity and universal human values is a silver bullet that will eliminate extremism, the results do suggest that doing so can help reduce the intergroup hostilities that result from extreme anti-bigotry rhetoric.