

NATION DIVIDED: HOW DO DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN VOTERS EXPERIENCE SHARED REALITY?

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Abstract

Shared reality with the nation (SR-N) is a subjective experience of having one's thoughts, emotions, and beliefs in common with other members in their nation. Shared reality is an important human motive because it serves basic relational and epistemic needs (i.e., it helps individuals feel connected with others and understand the world around them). However, escalating polarization poses a threat to achieving shared reality, jeopardizing social well-being. Research suggests that conservatives prioritize conformity and seek consensus in their group, leading to a stronger desire for shared reality. This paper describes a study involving 571 U.S. citizens, in which we examined how SR-N relates to national pride, trust, and loneliness. The results revealed that Democratic voters experienced less shared reality, lower national pride, and higher loneliness than Republicans. Path analysis showed that shared reality mediated relationships between political orientation and national pride, loneliness, and trust. This study underscores disparities in social well-being between Democratic and Republican voters, highlighting shared reality's role in mitigating polarization's adverse effects.

Keywords: *Shared reality, polarization, trust, Democrats, Republicans.*

1. Introduction

In their interactions with the world, humans seek to establish a sense of *shared reality*, the perceived commonality of feelings or beliefs about a particular target, such as a controversial issue, an event that took place, or another person. Shared reality is an important human motive because it serves basic relational and epistemic needs: It helps individuals feel connected with others and understand the world around them (Higgins, 2019). Research has primarily focused on shared reality in a dyadic context (e.g., between romantic partners or a pair of strangers; Rossignac-Milon, 2019). Yet, as a fundamental factor underlying cooperation and coordination in social interactions, shared reality is also vital for groups. One such group could be the nation.

Shared reality with the nation (SRN) refers to a subjective experience in which an individual's thoughts, emotions, and beliefs align with those of other members of their nation (Purc et al., in press). With the growing polarization in societies (Boxell et al., 2022), the ability to achieve a shared reality with one's nation members is being threatened. This state of affairs may have debilitating consequences for citizens' social well-being. Experimental research has demonstrated that when individuals believe that their preferences for the direction their society should take is congruent (vs. incongruent) with those of others in their country, they feel closer to other nation members and report stronger motivation to act together with them for the country's development (Purc & Roczniowska, 2024).

Because research has indicated that conservatives are more likely than liberals to prioritize values of conformity, possess a desire to share reality with like-minded others, and perceive strong within-group consensus (Stern et al., 2014), we expected liberal (e.g., Democratic) voters to be exposed to the negative consequences of polarization to a greater extent. Therefore, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1. Democratic voters experience lower shared reality with their nation than Republican voters.

Hypothesis 2. Being a Democratic (vs. Republican) voter is linked with higher loneliness, lower trust, and lower pride, and this relationship is mediated via weaker experience of shared reality with one's nation.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants ($N = 571$) were U.S. citizens and inhabitants recruited via Prolific Academic. Participants were remunerated for their time. Of the sample, 50% were women, 48.5% were men, and 1.5% were nonbinary. The mean age of the sample was 42 years ($SD = 15$). Regarding ethnicity, most of the participants identified as White/Caucasian (75%), followed by Black/African American (8.4%), Latino/Hispanic (5%), and White/Sephardic Jew (3.2%). The sample comprised 250 Democratic voters, 276 Republican voters, and 45 people who supported neither of these major parties.

2.2. Procedure and materials

The participants completed an online survey with instruments measuring shared reality with the nation (five items; Purc et al., in press), national pride (one item; Haerpfer et al., 2020), trust (one item; Haerpfer et al., 2020), loneliness (three items; Hughes et al., 2004), and political preferences (three items; Cichocka & Jost, 2014). All multi-item instruments exhibited high reliability, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha (above .90).

3. Results

All analyses were conducted in JAMOVI (The jamovi project, 2023). The results demonstrated that, compared to Republican voters ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.19$), Democratic voters ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.25$) expressed a significantly less pronounced experience of shared reality with their nation members, $t(524) = 5.91$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .52$, 95% CI [.34, .69]. This result supports Hypothesis 1.

In the next step, we conducted a path analysis, testing the expected mediations with bias-corrected bootstrapping (1,000) to estimate standard errors. Table 1 presents the obtained results.

Table 1. Results of the path analysis demonstrating relationships between political orientation, shared reality with the nation, national pride, trust, and loneliness.

Outcome	Predictor	Standardized Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Intervals		p
				Lower	Upper	
Loneliness	Political Orientation ^a	-0.107	0.044	-0.196	-0.022	0.015
Loneliness	Shared Reality	-0.239	0.046	-0.320	-0.142	< .001
Trust	Political Orientation ^a	-0.041	0.039	-0.112	0.037	0.287
Trust	Shared Reality	0.476	0.044	0.387	0.559	< .001
Pride	Political Orientation ^a	0.412	0.038	0.336	0.484	< .001
Pride	Shared Reality	0.380	0.038	0.296	0.452	< .001
Shared Reality	Political Orientation ^a	0.250	0.042	0.172	0.337	< .001

Note. ^a coding: 0—Democratic voter, 1—Republican voter

The results demonstrated that Republican voters felt lonely less frequently and felt more trust toward other U.S. citizens than Democratic voters but did not differ in trust. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the mediation analyses demonstrated indirect effects of shared reality between the political orientation and loneliness (estimate = -0.600, 95% CI [-0.095, -0.035]), trust (estimate = 0.119, 95% CI [0.076, 0.170]), and pride (estimate = 0.095, 95% CI [0.060, 0.132]).

4. Discussion

In this study, we illustrate the differences between Democratic and Republican voters regarding the facets of social well-being, such as trust, pride, and loneliness. Research has demonstrated that conservative political ideology is linked to valuing conformity and perceptions of in-group consensus (Stern et al., 2014), producing a stronger need to share reality with others. We extended these findings by

demonstrating that Democratic voters actually experience lower shared reality with their nation, feeling that they less frequently have a joint perspective or see a world in a similar way to other U.S. citizens, compared to Republican party voters. The lowered shared reality has consequences for the frustration of their need for relatedness and their epistemic needs, resulting in weaker national pride, lower trust in other U.S. citizens, and stronger loneliness.

Research on long-term trends in affective polarization shows that in the United States, polarization has increased more dramatically over the past 40 years than in the eight other studied countries (Boxell et al., 2022). Combined with these findings, our research shows that Democratic voters experience the political polarization in their country more severely, which threatens their well-being. The fact that conservatives have a stronger preference for certainty, conformity, and group cohesion (Stern et al., 2014) may serve a protective function, filtering out signals of disparities and differences in opinion.

We must acknowledge several limitations. First, this study reports cross-sectional findings; therefore, any causality claims are limited, and the results of the mediation analysis should be considered with caution. Second, several measures of outcomes are single-item instruments, and although they have been successfully applied in the World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al., 2020), this construction makes it impossible to assess their reliability. Third, because polarization has been shown to be strong and growing in the United States, it would be valuable to conduct a similar study in a context where polarization has decreased, such as Sweden and Germany (Boxell et al., 2022).

5. Conclusions

Whereas previous work on shared reality has focused mostly on dyads, our study captures shared reality in a more collective context, investigating the phenomenon of shared reality with a larger social group (i.e., one's nation). Using the lens of shared-reality theory, we explain that possessing a stronger desire to obtain shared reality with the nation among Republican voters may buffer the negative consequences of growing societal polarization. Exploring why and how citizens experience that they think and feel similarly to others in their country could offer ways to bridge gaps during times of growing divisions.

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