

Making it personal: Considering an issue's relevance to your own life could help reduce political polarization

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Political polarization can be reduced when people are told to think about the personal relevance of issues they might not care about at first glance.

We, [a social psychologist](#) and [an evolutionary psychologist](#), decided to investigate this issue with two of our [undergraduate students](#), and recently published [our results](#) in the journal *PLOS One*.

[Previous research](#) has found that conservatives tend to judge "disrespecting an elder" to be more morally objectionable behavior than liberals do. But when we had liberals think about how "disrespecting an elder" could be personally relevant to them—for example, someone being mean to their own grandmother—[their immorality assessments increased](#), becoming no different than conservatives'.

When people consider how an issue relates to them personally, [an otherwise neutral event seems more threatening](#). This, in turn, increases someone's perception of how morally objectionable that behavior is.

The pattern was different with conservative participants, however. When conservatives considered the personal relevance of what is typically considered a more "liberal" issue—a company lying about how much it is contributing to pollution—their judgments of how immoral that issue is did not significantly change.

Contrary to what we expected, both conservatives and liberals cared relatively equally about this threat even without thinking about its personal relevance. While some people did focus on the environmental aspect of the threat, as we intended, others focused more on the deception involved, which is less politically polarized.

All participants, no matter their politics, consistently rated more personally relevant threats as more immoral. The closer any threat feels, the bigger—and more wrong—someone considers it to be.

Why it matters

In the United States today, it can feel like conservatives and liberals are [living in different realities](#). Our research speaks to a possible pathway for narrowing this gap.

People often think of moral beliefs as relatively fixed and stable: Moral values feel ingrained in who you are. Yet our study suggests that [moral beliefs may be more flexible](#) than once thought, at least under certain circumstances.

To the extent that people can appreciate how important issues—like [climate change](#)—could affect them personally, that may lead to greater agreement from people across the political spectrum.

From a broader perspective, personal relevance is just one dimension of something called "[psychological distance](#)." People may perceive objects or events as close to or far away from their lives in a variety of ways: for example, whether an event occurred recently or a long time ago, and whether it is real or hypothetical.

Our research suggests that psychological distance could be an important variable to consider in all kinds of decision-making, including financial decisions, deciding where to go to college or what job to take. Thinking more abstractly or concretely about what is at stake might lead people to different conclusions and improve the quality of their decisions.

What still isn't known

Several important questions remain. One relates to the differing pattern that we observed with [conservative](#) participants, whose assessments of a stereotypically "liberal" threat did not change much when they considered its relevance to their own lives. Would a different threat—maybe gun violence or mounting student loan debt—lead to a different pattern? Alternatively, perhaps conservatives tend to be more

rigid in their beliefs than liberals, [as some studies have suggested](#).

In addition, how might these findings contribute to actual problem-solving? Is increasing the personal relevance of otherwise-neutral threats the best way to help people see eye to eye?

Another possibility might be to push things in the opposite direction. Making potential threats seem less personally relevant, not more, might be an effective way to bring people together to work toward a realistic solution.

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