

Study on the psychology of blame points to promising strategies for reducing animosity within political divide

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Ever look at a member of an opposing political party and wonder, "how could they possibly hold those despicable beliefs?"

It may be a dismissive question in our own minds, but actually knowing the answer might help heal the country's political divide, according to new research from Michael Gill, professor of psychology at Lehigh University, and Raihan Alam, a 2023 Lehigh alumnus and current doctoral student at the University of California San Diego.

In their study, self-identified partisans who read a [personal history](#), or "historicist narrative," about a member of the opposing party exhibited a significant reduction in animosity toward members of the opposing party as a whole. The study, "Partisan animosity through the lens of blame: Partisan animosity can be reduced by a historicist thinking intervention," was [published](#) in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

The "historicist narrative"—a story-like description of how an individual developed her character and worldview through formative life experiences (e.g., experiences that shaped her passionate liberalism)—has been a key feature of much of Gill's prior research on blame.

"With the ability to apply historicist thinking, we can reduce our tendency to be hostile and punitive toward those whom we disagree with, and be more willing to apply compassion and empathy in our interactions with them," said Alam, who as an undergraduate at Lehigh founded the Douglass Dialogues, a student club that encourages civil discourse about social, cultural and political topics.

The study included four [experiments](#). Two tested interventions with participants who self-identified as Democrat, and two tested interventions with participants who self-identified as Republican.

The effects were analyzed using two different widely used measures of animosity, a "feeling thermometer" and ratings of specific moral emotions (e.g., anger, disgust, compassion), for both a historicist intervention group and a [control group](#). About 2,150 participants were recruited for the study via the online research platform Prolific.

Despite the promising results, the approach is not a panacea for political disagreement, the researchers cautioned.

Effects of reading a 'personal history' varied

While the effect of the historicist intervention was as strong as many other approaches that have been applied to partisan animosity, it was weaker in the context of political animosity than in other realms Gill has studied, including perceptions of others' laziness, arrogance and criminal behaviors.

Effects also varied between Democrats and Republicans.

Self-identified Democrats in the experiment demonstrated both a reduction in animosity toward Republicans and an increase in compassion for them. The study partly attributed the increase in compassion to a decreased perception of self-formation—that is, a greater understanding that one's political beliefs are influenced by formative life experiences such as upbringing, community, religion and exposure to others.

That result echoed findings from a [prior study](#) by the authors examining the effects of historicist interventions on the harshness of participants' partisan replies on X (formerly Twitter).

Self-identified Republicans in the current experiment demonstrated a reduction in general "cold feelings" toward Democrats as well as a decrease in the moral emotions of disgust, disapproval, anger and contempt. However, the intervention had no impact on Republicans' compassion toward Democrats.

"One of the findings that I found most intriguing was that the intervention led Democrats to perceive all Republicans as having less control over the development of their political beliefs," Alam said.

"I think this is a fascinating shift, because it implies the ability to

generalize this perspective—that people don't have complete control over their own development—from individuals to groups. It makes me wonder what other implications this shift could have, even beyond American partisan animosity."

In the experiments, participants also read statements about how personal beliefs are malleable and could be influenced by formative experiences in the future. It's a hopeful note that echoes the potential for further progress using the historicist approach.

Scalable real-world interventions

"Our intervention was just a few sentences long (probably took about 10 seconds to read) but nevertheless had a statistically significant impact on animosity. To my mind, if we scaled the intervention up to something more like a brief documentary film that tells the unique formative stories of a dozen outparty members, the effect size would likely become much larger," Gill said.

"Now that we know that historicist thinking can reduce partisan animosity, we can think more about how to construct a more substantial intervention to deploy in the real world."

Alam framed the approach's promise not as a single [intervention](#) but rather as "an approach to thinking about other people that needs to be cultivated over time through the systems of influence in our society."

"Historicist thinking is difficult to do, and in fact, we're biased to focus on internal factors when we blame others," Alam said. "However by learning to do so, I think we might be able to bridge gaps between different political and ideological groups, and promote more constructive interactions between them."

More information: Raihan Alam et al, Partisan animosity through the lens of blame: Partisan animosity can be reduced by a historicist thinking intervention, *PLOS ONE* (2024). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0295513](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0295513)

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