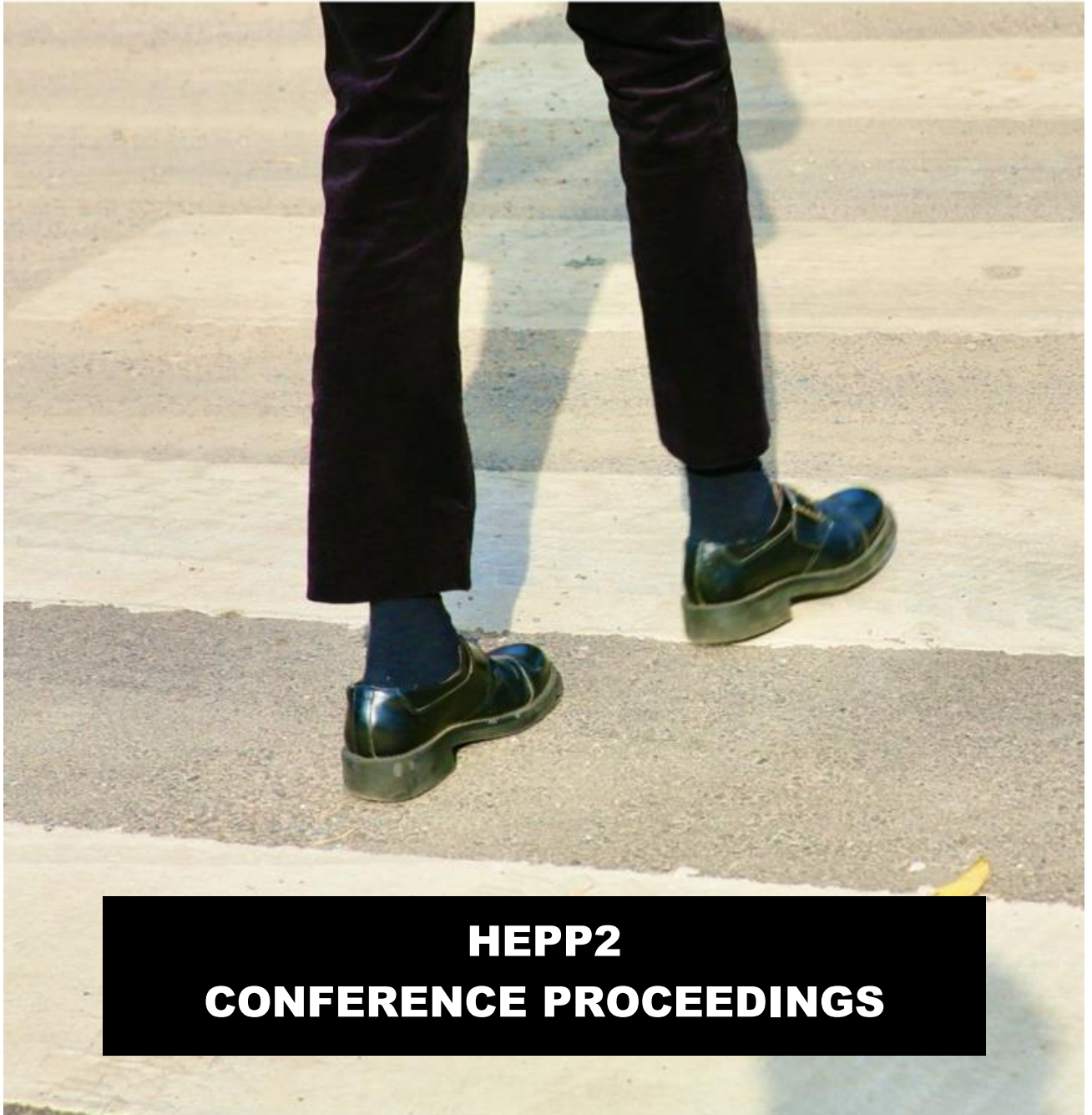


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**HELSINKI CONFERENCE ON EMOTIONS,
POPULISM AND POLARISATION**



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***The Working Paper Series on Emotions, Populism
and Polarisation***

VOL. 1, Issue 1:

**Reflections on Emotions, Populism and
Polarisation:**

HEPP2 Conference Proceedings

Editors:

Laura Horsmanheimo and Laura-Elena Sibinescu

HEPPsinki research group

University of Helsinki

The *Working Papers on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation* is an academic series that publishes both double blind peer-reviewed and non-blind peer reviewed papers on a bi-annual basis. The publications include the HEPP conference proceedings. The series is run by the Helsinki Hub on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation (HEPPsinki), established in 2020 as an umbrella organization and meeting point for a set of interdisciplinary teams collaborating within several externally funded projects since 2017, mainly in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki.

Editor of the Series: Emilia Palonen

Editors for Vol. 1: Laura Horsmanheimo and Laura-Elena Sibinescu

Editorial Board for Vol. 1: Juha Herkman, Emilia Palonen, Virpi Salojärvi, Marina Vulovic

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FOREWORD

Dear reader,

You are holding (or more likely staring at) the first volume of the HEPPsinki working paper series: *Working Papers on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation*. This first volume includes conference proceedings from the Second HEPPsinki Conference on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation (HEPP), organised virtually on 3-5 May 2021 at the University of Helsinki. The Conference and the Working Paper Series are organised by the Helsinki Hub on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation, HEPP or HEPPsinki, as we like to call it.

The virtual hub was set up in late spring 2020, following our successful First HEPPsinki conference and our Helsinki Summer School courses on rhetoric-performative post-foundational discourse analysis and on populism in 2019, as well as positive funding decisions for two major research projects from the Academy of Finland in 2018 and the Kone Foundation in 2019. The practical trigger was the administrative requirement for us to generate more websites for our projects, plus the academic need to generate collaboration between different projects, where people were working on related themes and would benefit from interaction. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided to set up just one more website — using the familiar name of our first conference — and start meeting virtually on a weekly basis.

Virtual meetings also created a basis for virtual collaboration. We had already started using MS Teams during our work on the Academy of Finland funded project *Whirl of Knowledge: Cultural Populism and Polarisation in European Societies and Politics*, which used a common dataset for social media research. All of that was a learning-by-doing experience, which is how we like to “do stuff” here at HEPPsinki – which I attribute to my roots at the Bauhaus Kolleg Dessau. Not always conventional, not always convenient, but with a lot of potential. This also set the basis for our second major project, *Now Time Us Space: Mobilisations and Politicisations in Central Eastern Europe*, funded by the Kone Foundation in 2020-2023.

We made the most out of MS Teams for the conference we organised in 2021, and although I know at least one colleague who dropped out because of the virtual platform (sceptics do exist), the feedback from the event was extremely positive. This also led us to share the conference papers. The conference papers are an important way of communicating on-going research and accounting for the type of themes discussed in a conference.

In choosing our theme and selecting participants, we wanted to be quite inclusive in 2021, in order to a wide range of themes develop at the conference. The papers we showcase in the *HEPP2 Conference Proceedings, Vol. 1.* in the HEPP series *Working Papers on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation* are a good selection. We have papers that conceptualise populism and polarisation, or emotions such as empathy. They also deal with democracy, conspiracy theories and biopolitics. Some papers take a historical perspective, such as Early Turkish populism; others discuss the media and populist or far right actors. A couple of the papers deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. The cases range, as they do in HEPPsinki in general, from the Latin America to Europe, Turkey and even beyond, starting with Kerala in India.

We present the papers to you in alphabetical order by author, but this also seemed to work somewhat thematically. The authors, who graciously responded to our call and patiently waited for the launch of the series, represent several disciplines and countries.

This volume presents a great start for the series, pertinent in the time of affective politics, the emergence and persistence of bipolar confrontations and rhetoric on us vs. them. In the pandemic period, allegiances have been reformulated, and the power of social media intertwines with biopolitics and inclusion and exclusion. In these moments, beliefs and confrontations of the past are important again, or they gain new forms. One of the thriving ideas in our HEPPsinki projects is to consider transnational flows of ideas, reconnect to past eras and their confrontations and to see how, in the present, the past is becoming ever more important.

Hopefully Volume 1 in our new series will provide inspiration for those tackling contemporary politics or doing research on phenomena ranging from emotions to past polarisations. I trust it can offer both new conceptual and analytical power and international examples in contemporary struggles.

Happy reading, and welcome back to Helsinki – this time hopefully in person to present and online to follow our keynotes at the HEPP3 conference in 15-18 June 2022. The research continues, despite the pandemics.

On behalf of all the HEPPsters,

Emilia Palonen, The Editor of Working Papers in Emotions, Populism and Polarisation



Emilia Palonen is Senior Researcher in Political Science at the University of Helsinki. She leads HEPPsinki, the Academy of Finland project *WhiKnow*, Kone-funded *NowTimeUsSpace* and is the PI at the Horizon-funded *DRad*. She has a BA in Contemporary East European Studies (London) and an MA and PhD in Ideology and Discourse Analysis (Essex).

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Affective dimension of Political Polarization. The role of Empathy

Martina Insero

Sapienza-University of Rome

Abstract

Among the various aspects that concern a discussed phenomenon such as populism, more and more importance is given to emotions and to the analysis of its affective dimension. The starting point of the populist vision is to establish the distinction “us-them”, and consequently this creates polarization and antagonism. Polarization is a complex phenomenon, strongly discussed especially in the United States, characterized by a conflictual logic to which are usually associated negative feelings. Is it possible to reverse this logic and to employ different emotions that are able to counter it? What are the emotions that can help with that? Many scholars today speak about Empathy. This paper aims to investigate approaches about the functionality and the role played by empathy in populist dynamics, particularly in polarisation, comparing different visions between who considers empathy as an element able to counteract antagonism and polarization, and who considers the contrary. The methodological framework of the proposal employs a theoretical perspective that refers mostly to historical-philosophical elements, with particular attention to the aspects of social and political psychology. In this sense it is first of all important to reconstruct the debate that has developed around the multiple meanings of empathy. The proposal aims at reflecting both on the strategic potential of the emotional aspect of the issue and on the analysis of the theories of this debate that can be useful to try to understand and to explain these political and social phenomena.

Keywords: emotions, empathy, polarization, populism, socio-political psychology

“It is now commonplace to observe that the last decade [...] cannot be understood without taking into account the bursting of political emotions” (Maldonado, 2019, p. 15). As never before in recent decades there has been an exponential development of studies focusing on the role of emotions in the humanities and social sciences. Since the second half of the 1990s, the intellectual debate has focused on the analysis and study of the affective dimension of the human nature, for a long time considered secondary or even denigrated. This dimension includes all those concepts such as passions, emotions, affects and feelings. Rethinking the emotional space means rethinking the subject, the reality and the modes of interaction amongst these parts at the same time; this is because emotions fall into every aspect of human life, from individual to collective experiences. As Evans writes, “emotion is now a hot topic” (2001, p. xiii). In this theoretical context it is very important to reconsider the link between emotions and politics, which was already a highly controversial debate in classical thought with the theories of Aristotle

and Plato who introduced the central dichotomy that opposes reason to emotion. This vision traditionally binds the political sphere to the sphere of rationality, the so-called *Logos*. Indeed, over the centuries, from Greek philosophy to contemporary theories, political thought has usually associated the political dimension to rationality, and it has conceived politics also as a public sphere and as a space dominated by the rationality of the subjects. Classical thought already posed the problem of trying to explain what kind of relationship there was between the political space structured according to logic and rationality, and the pathic universe of individuals; emotions and passions have always been considered as unconscious and mostly irrational elements, like “other of rationality” (Demertzis, 2013) which need to be managed and controlled for the proper functioning of political and social dynamics.

Studies of emotion have challenged the standard accounts of politics, shedding light on different forms of political action, dynamics of identity formation, and multi-dimensional aspects of civil engagement and political legitimacy. [...] Over the last decades, we have witnessed an Affective turn within social and political sciences. [...] This onto-epistemological turn has triggered a variety of normative consequences, one of which is the questioning of beliefs around democratic politics as essentially –when not exclusively– based on human rationality” (Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019, pp. 2-4).

Thanks to the development of this cultural turn (Clough & Halley, 2007; Thompson & Hoggett, 2012), basically a reaction to the poststructuralism (Terada, 2001) and excessive rationalism, and also to the complexity of the debate and the richness of the interdisciplinary studies (Damasio, 1994; Elster, 1999; Nussbaum, 2001; Lewis et al., 2008), many scholars have reconsidered the dialectic relationship between emotion and reason. In fact, they tried to demonstrate how both components actually play a role in the human decision-making process and in determining our actions. In particular, social psychology and political psychology have worked to eliminate this conflict by recognizing those two as essential elements for understanding human behavior and the unfolding of social relations. “Attending to the affective turn is necessary to theorizing the social” (Clough & Halley, 2007, p. 2). Reflecting on the relationship between emotions and politics means considering key categories and concepts that are related to dynamics of conflict, political communication, democratic politics and democratic dynamics. Amongst them, Political Theory has focused on the role that emotions, passions or affects, which are different concepts with a different semantic, play in the ambiguous phenomenon that is Populism; a phenomenon that Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (1969) have defined as “a specter that haunts the world” (p. 1) by paraphrasing Marx and Engel’s famous line. Populism is such a polysemous concept that an epistemic clash is occurring in order to understand and identify the appropriate approach to deal with this phenomenon. Nowadays, especially in the European and North American debate, this term means a certain way of doing politics which represents a general danger to democracy and pluralism; it has become a key category in recent political theory, and for this reason many scholars have focused on its affective properties, which are now necessary to understand the dynamics of our time (Bonansinga, 2020).

Since populism is something intrinsically related to democratic politics – as has been rightly pointed out, it follows democracy as a shadow –, it becomes clear that current accounts of emotions also have important theoretical and practical repercussions for the study of democratic politics (Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019, p. 3).

This is a notion strongly debated by contemporary political theory and political science. In fact, in recent years the concept of populism has gained massive attention in political discourses, becoming part not only of the theoretical language but also of the language of political leaders. Contemporary politics is therefore dealing with this new "form". It is not a new phenomenon, which has historically appeared around 1800 and then has changed over time depending on geographical, political and social contexts, but never as in the latest years it has forcefully manifested in different democratic contexts. The literature on this issue is vast and the complexity of research on populism makes this field of inquiry already characterized by widespread disagreement and a lack of full definitional consensus over the essence of the phenomenon (Weyland, 2001). This is, indeed, a notion that is used mostly in a polemic way.

Nadia Urbinati (2019) says that "the term "populism" itself is ambiguous and it is difficult to define in a sharp and uncontested way. This is because it is not an ideology or a specific political regime but rather a *representative process*, through which a collective subject is constructed so that it can achieve power" (p. 5). In academic literature, populism can be considered as an ideology that divides society into two opposed groups. Some scholars, for example, speak of populism as "thin-centered ideology" because of the inner ambiguities of the phenomenon (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Stanley, 2008); according to Laclau's vision (2005) it can be considered as a series of discursive practices which constitute the real essence of politics and create the concept of "people", or also as a "rhetorical style" (Canovan, 1981). Regardless of how it is theorized, the starting point of the populist vision is to establish a dynamic of conflict through the distinction *us-them*, *élite-people*, or *inside-outside*, and consequently this creates polarization and antagonism in society and among individuals. But what exactly is polarization? "Polarization is both a state and a process. Polarization as a state refers to the extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum. Polarization as a process refers to the increase in such opposition over time" (DiMaggio et al., 1996, p. 693). It is a complex phenomenon that can manifest itself in various ways, characterized by a conflictual logic, ideological gaps and conflictual attitudes among individuals and the different components of society. According to a recent study by Jan-Willem van Prooijen (2021),

- (a) political polarization implies excessive confidence in the correctness of one's views, which may lead to overconfidence in decision making;
- (b) political polarization is associated with an intolerant mindset where alternative viewpoints are seen as immoral;
- and (c) political polarization enhances a motivated reasoning process, leading people to reject scientific knowledge that is incompatible with their ideological beliefs (p. 5).

Partisan differences are not negative in their nature and are part of the democratic game fueling pluralism; however, when differences grow exponentially and they exceed a certain degree of intensity and lead to conflict, the phenomenon of polarization can become pathological creating complex challenges for democratic regimes. It is a political and social phenomenon that recently has been tried to be explained through a psychological analysis that is mainly focused on the attitudes of individuals and groups. Social and political psychologists have tried to explain the phenomenon of polarization in different ways. In particular through the Persuasive Arguments Theory, PAT (Vinokur & Burnstein, 1974), which suggests that shifts in group decisions result from sharing relevant and factual information about the situation and everything is based on the persuasiveness of the arguments, based on their validity and ability to convince; and through the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954; Brown,

1965; Sanders & Baron, 1977) based on the belief that individuals form, evaluate and consolidate their opinions by comparing themselves to others. The recent studies of emotions, not only in the philosophical and historical field but also in these empirical fields such as socio-political psychology and social neuroscience, have widely studied the relationship between polarization generated by populism and some political emotions which are at the core of democratic life, recognizing a strong affective dimension as a crucial component of this phenomenon. Emotions contribute to identity formation, and they take part in the creation of social bonds and the promotion of social cohesion (Markell, 2000). According to this theoretical approach, polarization has usually been associated with negative feelings (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019) like hate, disdain, fear (Van Prooijen et al., 2015), anxiety or anger (Frimer et al., 2018) that feed conflict and opposition. According to Sinnott-Amstrong (2018), for example, the most important aspects of polarization are “antagonism” and “incivility” which lead to all those negative feelings previously mentioned. Due to the increasing interest in the study of emotions and in particular of “political emotions”, attempts have been made to think of an alternative vision that would not associate these phenomena only to negative emotions and, instead, seeking other emotions that might have a potential to counter the logic of conflict and opposition. Is it possible to reverse this logic and employ different emotions able to counter it? What are the emotions that can help with that? Many scholars today speak about Empathy. It is a concept that appears in philosophical thought with the theories of David Hume and Adam Smith who speak of “sympathy”. It is precisely from the sympathy that it is possible to trace a common thread to contemporary developments. Indeed, it is placed at the basis of morality and human society, understood in particular by Hume as a sharing of the pleasure or pain produced in a person affected by an action. He also included in his moral philosophy an empirical explanation from which to derive the moral judgments and actions of human beings, a psychological mechanism, sympathy, capable of involving men in intersubjective communications. He wrote:

No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than the propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own. (...) Hatred, resentment, esteem, love, courage, mirth and melancholy; all these passions I feel more from communication than from my own natural temper and disposition. So remarkable a phenomenon merits our attention and must be traced up to its first principles (Hume, 1739, pp. 316-17).

According to Smith (1976),

by the imagination we place ourselves in this situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them” (p. 9),

like a sharing of any feeling of other people through a process of identification with the other. Sympathy is considered as the natural predisposition of individuals because it is an essential element of human nature and the foundation of social relations, and which indissolubly binds the sphere of morality to that of sentiment. During the nineteenth century, studies on empathy developed mainly in the through the

thought of these two authors, and then developed as an essentially psychological concept following the birth of scientific psychology and the pioneering studies of Theodor Lipps, who placed the concept of *Einfühlung* at the basis of his theories (1903). In these studies, empathy is conceived as a mechanism of psychological resonance triggered during the perceptive encounter with external objects unleashing a sort of process of fusion between subject and object, through the so-called "emotional participation". Later developments saw the formulation of Scheler's emotional contagion theory (1954), *Gefühlsansteckung*, studies in psychoanalysis, until the discovery in the neuroscientific field of mirror neurons (Rizzolatti et al., 1999; Gallese, 2003) that definitively introduced empathy into contemporary debate. Today, we often hear about empathy even if there is not yet an entirely shared consensus on what it actually is; as Gérard Jorland (2004) wrote, it has emerged "*concept 'nomade' par excellence*" (p. 19). It is generally understood as the capacity to feel other's people feelings, identify with the other, move from our own point of view. According to the most recent debate, empathy can be differentiated into three types and each of these aspects could help in the dynamics of social and political cohesion: cognitive, the capacity to understand another's perspective or mental state; affective, sharing of similar emotions; somatic, physical reaction, probably based on mirror neuron responses. At the core of recent literature, the study of the link between empathy and the role played in political and social dynamics has been widely developed. In addition, many scholars have focused on how much empathy counts in the dynamics of polarization and whether it can prove to be, or not, an element capable of combating it. In this context, it has been theorized a fundamental concept, the so-called empathic concern, which refers to other emotions like compassion, sympathy and love. For those who consider empathy as a functional factor for cohesion, it is important to consider the mechanism of the persons involved in the reciprocal experiences: especially with regard to the experiences of pain and the sight of injustice, which leads to attitudes of solidarity and to the rediscovery of a strong social bond. However, from a different perspective, the dynamics created by empathy do not always completely eliminate polarization, as it can be seen in the studies of the psychologist Paul Bloom's book *Against Empathy* (2016), or in the studies of the political psychologist Elizabeth Simas (Simas, Clifford, & Kirkland, 2020). Empathic concern divides the question into an internal and an external level: empathy can strengthen links of members of the same group, but also accentuate the differences (social, political, cultural, ideological and economic) towards outgroup members. The theme of the link between empathy and polarization is strongly debated with respect to the American situation, especially after the famous Obama's discourse:

You know, there's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit – the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us [...] cultivating this quality of empathy will become harder, not easier. There's no community service requirement in the real world; no one forcing you to care. [...] Not only that – we live in a culture that discourages empathy (2006).

The United States has been experiencing a dramatic increase in partisan social and political polarization and, especially since the 2016 elections, the citizens show more and more contempt towards the opposite party. American theorists have tried to respond to these gaps with this social emotion: empathy. In this framework, in addition to the political polarization, it is also possible to speak of affective

(Iyengar et al., 2019) and ideological polarization. Regarding the situation of American parties, it has been noted that:

Republicans and Democrats have moved further apart on political values and issues, there has been an accompanying increase in the level of negative sentiment that they direct toward the opposing party [...]. Among members of both parties, the shares with very unfavorable opinions of the other party have more than doubled since 1994 (Pew Research Center 2017, 65).

Given the recent social tensions and the increasingly frequent conflicts between groups, it seems to be common opinion that American people are becoming even more hostile towards who belongs to another different party. In this sense, it has become stronger and stronger the idea that empathy can actually produce results that exacerbate the hostility that people feel about members of an outgroup. The ability to empathize is an important factor in determining how we respond to politics and, more importantly, how politics affects people (Feldman et al., 2020). According to some conceptions, the ability to feel empathy varies according to political ideals and political positions and, traditionally, liberal politicians and liberal and democratic voters are likely to have greater capacity; therefore, empathy seems closer to liberal policies. However, this is not a universally shared idea, and it is part of a series of very complex analyses and studies. Paul Bloom (2016) argues that liberals and conservatives are different not in terms of their general levels of empathy, but rather in terms of whom they empathize with.

Contemporary literature on personality traits shows that generally liberals tend to be more open to social change, more egalitarian, more favorable to economic policies aimed at eliminating wealth inequality and promoting the welfare of groups subject to discrimination, more favorable in their attitudes towards immigration (Morris 2020, pp. 10-11). Several studies seem to demonstrate a correlation between the degree of empathy and this type of aptitude, and therefore with the various political groups. The debate on the relationship between empathy and polarization, as we have seen, appears still very controversial since there are ambivalent conceptions regarding the role of empathy in polarization dynamics. Every research that seeks to resolve these fractures, must keep in mind how empathy is a complex concept, so how complex is human nature. Populism and polarization are phenomena that are now part of our politics; it is necessary to think of a different narrative that is not only a general appeal for solidarity and compassion, but an effective way of strengthening social relations among the individuals.

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