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Subject: Why do we hate each other?
Date: June 2, 2023 at 8:57 AM
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Why do we hate each other?

By Isaac Saul • 2 Jun 2023 •

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I'm Isaac Saul, and this is Tangle: an independent, nonpartisan, subscriber-supported politics newsletter that summarizes the best arguments from across the political spectrum on the news of the day — then "my take."

Today's newsletter is a subscribers-only Friday edition.

Why do we hate each other?

That question is at the center of a new book called Undue Hate, written by Daniel Stone, who explores the ways our own biases, psychology, and belief formation are driving us apart not just in the

political realm, but in life more generally.

Stone's thesis is that partisans in America dislike people they disagree with excessively, for a variety of reasons, but that dislike is often driven by mistaken beliefs and incorrect assumptions. To find evidence for his thesis, he reviewed studies on the accuracy of people's beliefs about opinions held by members of the other political party. And what he found might surprise you: We are not particularly good at understanding our opposition.

We've touched on this issue in the past in pieces that comment on the "perception gap" — the difference between what we think the other side believes and what they actually do, which Stone references in our interview below. For example, if you ask Republicans whether they agree with the statement "properly controlled immigration can be good for America," about 80% say they agree. But if you ask Democrats to estimate how many Republicans agree with that, they guess about 50%.

Likewise, if you say to Democrats that most police are bad people, about 80% say they *disagree*. But if you ask Republicans to guess how many Democrats disagree with that statement, they think it's less than 50%.

In our interview with Stone, we don't just discuss this phenomenon, but the implications of it. What happens when we think people are worse than they are? How do we react? How does it further shape our beliefs? And how does it stop us from having dialogue with people on the other side?

Our conversation has been lightly edited for clarity and length. I hope

you enjoy it.

Isaac Saul: I came across your work by reading a piece you wrote in The Conversation, which I thought was fascinating. It was about the way we think about our political opposition and some of our misconceptions about them. But I'd love to just start with some of the basics. I don't know if I know what a "behavioral economist" is [laughs]. Maybe you could start by explaining that to me and a little bit about how your work touches politics?

Daniel Stone: Yeah, sure. I'll take a shot at that. Behavioral economics is the combination of psychology and economics. It incorporates more realistic psychology into the study of decision making and belief formation. So standard or neoclassical economics is sort of famous or infamous for assuming that people are sort of robots, rational maximizers or optimizers — in other words, that people make perfect decisions all the time. And also that we're great with statistics, that we incorporate new information in a statistically optimal way in forming beliefs under uncertainty. And behavioral economics is the attempt to model and understand the way people *actually* form beliefs and make decisions in a more psychologically realistic way.

Isaac Saul: Are you telling me that people don't take evidence into account when they're making decisions about how they feel on certain issues? [Laughs]

Daniel Stone: Yeah, right. So sometimes we ignore our evidence more than we should and sometimes we overreact to evidence. And sometimes we just make both mistakes. So it's kind of obvious that

sometimes we just make both mistakes. So it's kind of obvious that people screw up, but figuring out the specific patterns and the ways we screw up is not so obvious. We're still working on that.

Isaac Saul: One of the things that you wrote about in this piece, and I know is central to your book, is the "affective polarization bias," which even as a political reporter and somebody who writes and thinks a lot about political biases and polarization was a term that was new to me. And I'm wondering if you could maybe explain what the affective polarization bias is and how it works.

Dan: No shame in that term being new to you, because it's a new term. It's a term I introduced in my book. Everyone's hearing about it for the first time now, for better or for worse. The term that you probably *are* familiar with is affective polarization. That's the term for emotional polarization. So rather than parties or people or whoever being polarized in terms of what they believe about an issue, affective polarization refers to polarization of feelings and people, just growing to dislike or feel hostility toward those we disagree with. So affective polarization bias is a term that I suggest for the idea that we actually tend to become excessively affectively polarized as compared to how much we should be by some objective standard.

So in the past, it has been implied that affective polarization is inherently irrational. But it's not clear that it's necessarily irrational to dislike another person, right? And in fact, some people might think that interpersonal feelings are something that can't be evaluated with respect to rationality, right? Feelings are just feelings, so we can't say if they're right or wrong. So people seem to think active polarization was bad, but we couldn't deem it to be objectively wrong and

objectively biased.

But in the book, I argue that actually, yes, we can say that sometimes we are *objectively* too affectively polarized. Because our feelings toward other people are based on our beliefs about who they are, about the actions they take, and the opinions they hold. And if those beliefs are factually wrong and — and they can be, right? — then we can be too polarized.

I might believe that you like to kick dogs when you walk by them for no reason at all. And perhaps that's not true at all. But if I believe that, that might cause me to dislike you. And if it's a false belief, I'll dislike you more than I should.

So given that we can have false beliefs driving our feelings, we can dislike people more than we should. We can like people more than we should. Affective polarization bias refers to the bias towards disliking people more than we objectively should, more than we should if we had accurate beliefs about their character traits and actions. So I claim that we generally have this bias toward people that we disagree with about political issues, but it also results in disagreement on non-political issues.

Isaac Saul: So when you guys go about doing this research, it seems like there's kind of a fundamental underpinning here, which is that people misunderstand the folks whose politics they disagree with. Is that a fair reading of what you've sussed out?

Daniel Stone: That's one of the major findings which supports the claim that affective polarization bias is a real phenomenon. So I think

you're aware of a lot of this research. We tend to overestimate the extremism of the other side. We overestimate their consistency and homogeneity. We think they're all one crazy bad type and they're actually more diverse than we realize. We also misunderstand and overestimate how much they hate us. They don't hate us as much as we think. We don't like people that hate us, and so if we overestimate their hate, we like them less.

Another type of evidence I introduced in the book is that we overestimate how selfishly they act in experiments where people face choices between actions that benefit themselves and hurt other people. Or actions which are more prosocial and help everybody in the experiment, but maybe don't help the individual making the decision quite as much.

There have been a decent number of social science experiments on this type of thing where people are brought into the experiment, we ask them if they are a Democrat or Republican. We tell them, 'Make choice A or B, you get a real payment in dollars from A and other people get another payment if you choose A and different payments from B.' And some experiments have asked people, well, what do you expect people in the other party to do in these experiments? If you're a Democrat, do you expect Republicans to do the selfish thing or the pro-social thing? If you're Republican, do you expect Democrats to do the selfish thing or the pro-social thing? And there's evidence that in these experiments, people also misunderstand how unselfishly the other side acts, even when people are given bonus payments for guessing this accurately.

So I'll say in the experiment that you can't just bad mouth the other side just for fun. I'm going to pay you a little bit more if you accurately

side just for fun. I'm going to pay you a little bit more if you accurately guess how the choice is made by the other party in this experiment. And even when people are paid for accuracy, they're too pessimistic about the other side, which shows part of our hostility toward the other side is based on a genuine misunderstanding of who they are. So there are a bunch of types of data that support this point, which I think is intuitive to most people. Most people think, "yeah, of course we misunderstand the other side." But the range of data verifying it is pretty impressive.

Isaac Saul: How wide is that gap? When you talk about something like prosocial versus antisocial behavior, are we talking about 5% to 10%? Or are we talking about 30%, 40%, 50%? What's the range of misunderstanding that you guys see in this research?

Dan: That's a really good question, because the magnitude is important, right? If we're just off by a little bit, then it's no big deal. So I'd say this is absolutely an active research area. There aren't that many studies that both run this type of experiment and ask people to guess what the other side is going to do in this experiment. But in the first one, the one I talk about the most in the book, the gaps are pretty huge. On average, something like 60% of Democrats and Republicans did this sort of unselfish, cooperative thing. And both Democrats and Republicans underestimated the extent to which the other side did it by something like 30 or 40 percentage points. Now that was one study from over five years ago, and that one you could poke some holes in.

But there is a more recent study that I did myself with a limited sample size, but it was interesting. It was on what's called the partisan trolley problem. You have probably heard of the trolley problem,

where people face a choice: There is a trolley heading down a track, it's about to kill five people. But you can pull a lever and save those five people and kill one.

So it seems fairly clear to most people, it's good to pull the lever. While some people are resistant because they would feel like pulling a lever makes them a murderer in some sense, most people choose to pull it to save five, even if it means killing one. So some people have studied, well, what happens if the five that you're saving are from the other party and the one that you're killing is from your own party, hypothetically? It's pretty morbid, but they did the study. And the percentage of people willing to pull the lever is still the majority, but it's down to 60%. And this is again, hypothetical. So maybe in reality, it would be much higher. But something like 90% of people pull the lever to save five and kill one in general, and only 60% pull the lever to save five from the other party and kill one from their own party.

So I asked people in a different experiment, if you're a Democrat, what percentage of Republicans do you think pulled this lever? And I'll pay you more if you guess it accurately. And Democrats underestimated this by a decent amount, something like 10 percentage points. So given that the baseline is 60% and people guessed 50%, that's a 10-percentage-point decline, which is fairly high. And it grows a little higher when we look at the most affectively polarized people.

So the group that hates the other side the most were most pessimistic about the other side's chances of doing what most people consider to be the morally right thing, pulling the lever. Again, even when they got a bonus payment for guessing accurately, so they couldn't just badmouth for fun. So, that's pretty substantial.

And there are other studies, especially the studies on our beliefs about how much the other side hates us and dehumanizes us. We're way off there. We're way off on our beliefs about their support for political violence, which is still tiny. It's generally under 5% of people who actually would say it's justified. I know that we vastly overestimate the other side's support, I don't know the exact numbers offhand, but I would guess that people guess something like 30% or 40% of the other party supports political violence. So orders of magnitude off there.

Isaac Saul: What prompted you to explore this question? Of all the kinds of studies and research people can do in this space, the political space, or the behavioral economic space, why did this one stick out to you as being a valuable inquiry?

Daniel Stone: I love that question. For one thing, as an economist, I very much value efficiency and absence of waste. And to me, polarization is a key driver of inefficiency in the United States, but in all sorts of situations. When people butt heads and disagree and get all riled up, we miss out on so many opportunities, and that's what prevents us from making so many reasonable decisions and doing a lot of mutually beneficial things. So polarization to me is often fundamentally inefficient, a driver of inefficiency, and that's what's linked to economics.

I started off doing research on climate change. I was pretty concerned about it, it seemed like the science showed we had consensus on one side, or we had a lot of clarity on one side, and I realized that there was a lot of opposition. So, for a number of years, I was trying to figure out what it was, whether it was lobbying or PR. And I came to realize the fundamental obstacle was actually affective polarization. So if you

dislike someone, you're not going to admit they're right, even if the evidence is really clear they're right. It's sort of another example of how polarization drives inefficiency. It could stop us from implementing policies that we would agree on otherwise.

And I've also become really attuned to looking out for what I call bias, dislike, or affective polarization bias all over the place. This morning my wife was going off about someone not responding to her email. And she was like, "Did I do something wrong? Did I annoy her?" Maybe this person who my wife had thought was a great person, maybe she's not so great. And my wife is ready to either give her the cold shoulder or maybe even say something rude to her and really retaliate. And then she discovered that actually that person had replied to the email and she had just missed it.

This is just one email, of course, and it shouldn't be a big deal either way. But it's yet another example of how the hard feelings are so often driven by misunderstanding. And, a connection to behavioral economics is behavioral economics is about problems with the way we form beliefs, biases with how we form beliefs. So I came to realize, wait a second, a lot of our affective polarization is driven by dumb beliefs, inaccurate beliefs. We jump to conclusions. We become sure about the other side's bad character. And I just kept discovering more and more reasons for these bad beliefs. And that's what made me want to write a whole book. So a lot of the book is the theory and explanations for the bad beliefs, rather than documentation of the evidence, but I do think the documentation is pretty solid.

Isaac Saul: One of the things that you mentioned in this piece in The Conversation was about strategic retaliation and the role that that plays in contributing to this undue

dislike that some people have for each other. Can you explain what that is and how that works? What is the function there?

Daniel Stone: We're all familiar with the idea of tit-for-tat, right? And when someone wrongs us, we feel entitled to get them back. And maybe that'll even the score. So that's deeply ingrained. Someone does us a favor, we'll do them a favor back. Someone screws us over, we'll try to screw them back. Look at little kids, if one punches one, the other one's going to punch back. So that's deep in our nature. The problem is we so often think that we were wronged when we weren't really. We just missed the email back. We misinterpret. Reality is complicated and noisy. And so when we see the other side do something that we think is a sin, some sort of offense, half the time they're oblivious. Or some fraction of the time, they actually did something wrong, but we're overstating in our head how bad it was.

This is why conflict spirals are so common and why these things build on themselves — because each side overestimates the extent to which their retaliation is justified. If you don't even mean to snub me and I interpret what you do as a snub, I punch you back, you're like, “why did Dan punch me? I didn't do anything wrong.” So you punch me back even harder. And I say, wait, I was just evening the score, and it was fair, so why did he punch me back harder? And I'll get you back harder.

So in politics, when does this happen? A natural place to look for this type of thing is the battles over the Supreme Court. Republicans are still talking about Robert Bork from the 1980s and how the Democrats blocked him, so they use that as justification for some of their hardball measures, like in 2016 when McConnell blocked Garland. Now

measures, like in 2016 when McConnell blocked Garland. Now Democrats are saying what McConnell did to Garland was horrible and that's completely unjustified, and therefore we should explore court packing and taking other measures.

So the basic idea is that retaliation works in very simple settings where we have clear information about whether the other side has cheated and deserves a rebuke or not. But since reality is so much more complicated, we often imagine or overestimate the other side's sins and underestimate our own sins. And then when these things lead to feedback, we don't understand why and we escalate in turn.

Isaac Saul: Related to that, you talk about there being some solutions to breaking out of this. I asked about strategic retaliation because it feels so deeply relevant to so many of the political issues that we're facing. You seem to have a somewhat optimistic view that there are some avenues for course correction here. I'd love to talk about those and hear a little bit about how you feel we might be able to maybe break down some of the affective polarization bias. Maybe we don't get Republicans and Democrats to stop fighting, but we get people to better understand their political opponents a little bit.

Daniel Stone: It's a tricky one. I think creating awareness of the bias is a start, and people like you, what you're doing, is going to help. So just generally being aware that when we demonize and bash the other side, we're probably misjudging them and getting them wrong.

In terms of specific policies, it's tough. I love the idea of third-party mediation, even though I know it sounds a little absurd. But he-said-

she-saids are so impossible to resolve. Suppose you and I are having a fight, and you tell me that it's all my fault. I'm never going to believe you because I think you have a personal interest in blaming me more than you should. And so we need a neutral third party to arbitrate. Why not something like that for Congress? It used to be the media because the mainstream media used to be more of a trusted referee, for better or for worse. You could say they were trusted more than they should have been. But they were effectively considered more of a neutral third party and we've lost that.

It's also commonly suggested that we'd be better off having more than two parties, that the two party system is destined to turn into really intense warfare. And so there are some policy changes like expanding the size of congressional districts and ranked choice voting that would make third and fourth and fifth parties more viable. I think those are nice ideas. Since the court battles are so intense, I think some sort of reform there would help. 18-year Supreme Court appointments, maybe even just rotate them between parties as long as we have a two-party system. We should stop making presidential elections all about Supreme Court appointments because that can cause people to vote for candidates that they hate just to get their justices appointed. So let's just rotate the appointments. Filibuster reform would be a great one — right now, it's so easy to torpedo.

You asked before, “Where is there more consensus than people realize?” Gun control is a good one. Even the vast majority of Republicans supports more gun control, but it doesn't happen because of the filibuster. So how do we improve that? There are a lot of ideas out there but no one's really talking seriously about any of them. And really bigger picture, I think that our leaders at the top of government — the president, House leaders, etc. — should be acknowledging that

polarization is what prevents us from solving so many other problems and should be taking steps to figure out how to beat polarization. Even if we don't know the exact solutions, they should say we're going to invest real resources in an anti-polarization Manhattan Project.

Isaac Saul: One of the things that you mentioned as well that that stuck out to me was this idea that people are often overconfident in how much consensus there is out there with their own personal view, which I thought was really fascinating and again feels kind of deeply relevant to a lot of what's happening in in US politics. I was wondering if you could flesh that part out a little bit for me?

Daniel Stone: So there's this important bias called the false consensus bias, which is a bias towards thinking there's more consensus than there really is, thinking that other people agree with us or share our tastes more than they really do. And it almost sounds like the opposite of the bias towards overestimating differences in our beliefs, but they're related.

So false consensus means if I think our country needs a stronger social safety net and higher taxes and more support for low income or unemployed people, this is just obviously true and everybody must think that. If I'm subject to false consensus, I'm going to overestimate how much you agree.

So then if I see you go out and say, "the government's inefficient, we should just cut government spending and cut taxes," I'm going to think you can't really believe that. You must know we actually need a big government to support people who are struggling. So if you're