

## The Impact of Social Norms on Cohesion and (De)Polarization

Miranda J. Lubbers <sup>1</sup> , Marcin Bukowski <sup>2</sup> , Oliver Christ <sup>3</sup> , Eva Jaspers <sup>4</sup> ,  
and Maarten van Zalk <sup>5</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Psychology, Jagiellonian University, Poland

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Psychology, FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany

<sup>4</sup> Department of Sociology, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

<sup>5</sup> Department of Developmental Psychology, University of Osnabrück, Germany

**Correspondence:** Miranda J. Lubbers ([mirandajessica.lubbers@uab.cat](mailto:mirandajessica.lubbers@uab.cat))

**Submitted:** 21 July 2025 **Published:** 5 August 2025

**Issue:** This editorial is part of the issue “The Impact of Social Norms on Cohesion and (De)Polarization” edited by Miranda Lubbers (Autonomous University of Barcelona), Marcin Bukowski (Jagiellonian University), Oliver Christ (FernUniversität in Hagen), Eva Jaspers (University of Utrecht), and Maarten van Zalk (University of Osnabrück), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i438>

### Abstract

In recent years, political and social polarization has increased across many societies, evolving from mere issue-based disagreements into affective polarization, in which citizens dislike and distrust members of opposing groups. This trend undermines social cohesion and the effective functioning of democratic institutions. Despite extensive interdisciplinary research into polarization, the role of social norms—shared expectations about typical and appropriate behavior—in mitigating such divisions remains underexamined. This thematic issue seeks to address this gap by investigating how social norms shape intergroup dynamics in polarized contexts. To frame the contributions, this introductory article first outlines the concepts of polarization and social norms and then briefly reviews the literature on the role of norms in polarization and depolarization. Subsequently, we introduce the contributions included in this thematic issue, which explore four central themes: (a) the role of social norms in fostering tolerance and depolarization; (b) the association between norm deviations and non-normative behaviors and political polarization; (c) the negotiation versus contestation of social norms by competing groups; and (d) the influence of social networks on intergroup attitudes and behaviors that can facilitate depolarization processes. We conclude with reflections on future research directions.

### Keywords

intergroup relationships; interventions; polarization; social cohesion; social norms

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, societies around the world have experienced rising political polarization (McCoy et al., 2018; Phillips, 2022; Reiljan, 2019). Ideological polarization, typically defined as the growing distance between political parties or candidates in terms of policy positions and values (Harteveld et al., 2022), can, to some extent, benefit democracy by clarifying party choices, stimulating democratic debate, and encouraging civic engagement. However, it turns harmful when “the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension,” leading people to view politics and society through a stark “us versus them” lens (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 16; cf. Jost et al., 2022; McCoy & Somer, 2019).

Three interrelated tendencies make this rise in polarization particularly concerning. First, political identities are increasingly aligned with other salient social identities, such as ethnicity, migration status, gender, sexual orientation, and social class. For example, Iyengar et al. (2019) observed that “White evangelicals...are overwhelmingly Republican today, and African Americans overwhelmingly identify as Democrats” (p. 134), illustrating the correlation between political affiliation and race and religion in the US. This alignment extends into lifestyle domains, where preferences for leisure activities and consumption choices are increasingly politicized, a phenomenon popularly known as the “culture wars” (Hunter, 1991; cf. DellaPosta et al., 2015). Lifestyle politics, defined as the “politicization of everyday life choices, including ethically, morally or politically inspired decisions about, for example, consumption, transportation, or modes of living” (de Moor, 2017, p. 181), reinforces this dynamic. As a result, a “stereotypical world” emerges, a world of ‘latte liberals’ and ‘bird-hunting conservatives’” (DellaPosta et al., 2015, p. 1475). In such a world, politically opposed groups have less common ground.

Second, and relatedly (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019), polarization today is not limited to ideological disagreement but increasingly takes the form of *affective* polarization, defined as the tendency to dislike, distrust, and avoid those with opposing ideologies (Gidron et al., 2023; Iyengar et al., 2019). Affective polarization has intensified over time (Gidron et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019) and is characterized by emotional hostility and social distancing between partisans (Balcells & Kuo, 2022; Hobolt et al., 2021). It is particularly pronounced in societies with high income inequality and unemployment (Gidron et al., 2020), where structural grievances may amplify intergroup resentment.

Third, political and media actors, including populist parties, often deliberately exploit affective polarization (Davis et al., 2024) to mobilize their base and consolidate support, thereby exacerbating divisions. Populist parties typically use discursive frames that distinguish between the people they claim to protect (“us”) and a corrupt elite they claim to fight (“them”; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Scholars have therefore argued that such parties inherently foster affective polarization by positioning themselves as the sole defenders of democracy while portraying their rivals as threats (e.g., Roberts, 2021; Urbinati, 2019). By doing so, they justify the restriction of their rivals’ civil liberties and compromise fair elections. In addition, populists tend to redefine who belongs to the democratic community, often excluding immigrants, other minorities, and political opponents from being seen as legitimate citizens. As a result, tolerance declines, negative stereotypes about political opponents are reinforced, and social interactions outside the political arena are discouraged. In addition, populist rhetoric often provokes a reaction from opponents, pushing them to adopt similarly divisive tactics (Stavrakakis, 2018), such as portraying populist voters as ignorant or claiming exclusive ownership of democratic values. Davis et al. (2024) show that affective polarization is higher in countries with a strong presence of populism, not only among its supporters but also among its critics.

Together, these tendencies illustrate how polarization has spilled over from the political realm into everyday social life, shaping how individuals perceive others and interact with them across categorical boundaries of class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religion (Castle, 2018). These divisions erode mutual understanding, reduce tolerance, and hinder intergroup contact and cooperation. At the societal level, they threaten the functioning of democracies (McCoy et al., 2018) by fueling hate speech and political violence (Suarez Estrada et al., 2022), impeding collective problem-solving, and contributing to democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2021).

Despite extensive research on the causes and consequences of polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019) and growing interest in interventions aimed at reducing affective polarization (Huddy & Yair, 2021; Levendusky, 2018; Tausch et al., 2024; Voelkel et al., 2022), relatively little attention has been paid to the role of social norms. Yet, social norms—shared expectations about common and appropriate behavior—are powerful regulators of intergroup dynamics. They can shape how individuals express disagreement, regulate negative sentiment toward other social groups (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014; Meleady, 2021), and stimulate the willingness to engage respectfully with people one disagrees with. As such, norms may either mitigate or exacerbate the harmful effects of polarization. However, we still know relatively little about how they are perceived, transmitted, contested, or enforced in polarized contexts, and under what conditions they can help mitigate the harmful effects of polarization.

This thematic issue addresses this gap by investigating how the transmission of and conformity to prosocial norms can promote tolerance and foster the willingness to interact and collaborate with other social groups in polarized contexts, and if and how norms can decrease polarization. It was organized within the framework of the research project Inclusivity Norms to Counter Polarization in European Societies (INCLUSIVITY), an international collaborative project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation that involved the guest editors of this thematic issue. This project investigates inclusivity norms, defined as social group norms that promote equality-based respect, dialogue, and unity. It aims to identify what the core ingredients of such norms should be to prevent the corrosive consequences of polarization on the social fabric of European societies (e.g., Ciordia et al., in press; Richters et al., 2025; Schäfer et al., 2024; Shani et al., 2023; Simons et al., 2025). This thematic issue presents results from the INCLUSIVITY project as well as contributions from other scholars working on similar topics from psychology, sociology, political sciences, civilization studies, and anthropology. By exploring the impact of norms on (de-)polarization, this thematic issue aims to gain new insights into creating a more cohesive and inclusive society.

In the following two sections, we introduce the concept of social norms and their key dimensions, and then review the literature on their role in polarization and depolarization. Subsequently, we present the contributions included in this thematic issue. We conclude with a forward-looking reflection on possible directions for future research.

## 2. Social Norms

Social norms are generally understood as the informal rules that govern individual behavior within groups and societies (Bicchieri et al., 2023; Coleman, 1990; Hecter & Opp, 2001). They act as a “grammar of social interactions” (Bicchieri, 2006; Bicchieri et al., 2023) or an unwritten “code of conduct” (Geber & Sedlander, 2022), informing group members about what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior in specific

situations. Thus, by prescribing and proscribing particular behaviors in a wide range of social situations, from how and when to respond to disagreement to when to help others, norms facilitate smooth social interaction and contribute to group cohesion.

For individuals to act upon group norms, they first need to perceive them. Geber and Sedlander (2022) call this macro-micro link from collective norms to individual norm perceptions a “communication link” (p. 4), where individuals infer group norms from the verbal and non-verbal cues provided by referents. A reference group is defined as “the relevant others whose behavior and (dis)approval matter in sustaining the norm” (Legros & Cislighi, 2020, p. 75), which includes mostly other group members, but also authorities, institutions, and media content. This process begins early in life through socialization by parents, teachers, and peers, and continues throughout adulthood, as individuals constantly update their impressions of what behaviors are typical and valued within their social networks, wider social groups, and society at large (Tankard & Paluck, 2016). Given this ongoing process of social learning and updating, both social norms and norm perceptions remain subject to change. Scholars often distinguish between individuals’ perceptions of “descriptive norms” (common behaviors of the reference group in a given situation) and “injunctive norms” (behaviors that are valued or approved by the reference group for a given situation; Cialdini et al., 1990).

Social norms are a key driver of human behavior. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships and therefore, they tend to be motivated to internalize group norms and abide by them (cf. González, 2025); norms even become part of one’s identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Meleady, 2021). Social norm interventions are therefore effective in stimulating desirable outcomes in many areas: simply evoking a social norm enhances the probability that people reuse towels in hotels, eat healthier, vote in general elections, give to charity, and care for the environment (research summarized by Meleady, 2021). Evoking social norms also encourages intergroup contact: Studies have shown that individuals are more likely to engage in intergroup contact when they perceive it as socially approved or expected, highlighting the importance of descriptive and injunctive norms in guiding individual but also collective behavior (Prentice & Paluck, 2020; Tankard & Paluck, 2016). However, norm violations are also frequent. Norm compliance can also be enforced by the group or society exerting normative pressure and sanctions, including gossip, ostracism, group exclusion, and punishment (Eriksson et al., 2021).

### 3. Social Norms, Affective Polarization, and Depolarization

Despite the growing literature on affective polarization, the role of social norms remains relatively underexplored (Balafoutas et al., 2024; Cole et al., 2025). Most research has focused on psychological, institutional, or media-related drivers of polarization, including partisan identity, misinformation, and echo chambers (Huddy & Yair, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2019). Interventions to reduce affective polarization have often emphasized empathy-building, perspective-taking, or exposure to counter-attitudinal views (Voelkel et al., 2022). However, these approaches pay relatively little attention to social norms.

The limited research that does exist on the role of social norms in affective (de-)polarization suggests that they can both mitigate and exacerbate polarization, depending, firstly, on how the members of a group perceive ingroup norms regarding interactions with outgroups (González, 2025). On the one hand, social norms may reinforce affective polarization if the ingroup is perceived as avoiding contact with outgroup

members (descriptive norm) or disapproving of such contacts (injunctive norm). On the other hand, social norms may reduce affective polarization if the ingroup is perceived as valuing open and respectful dialogue and tolerance, even toward outgroup members (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014; Meleady, 2021).

Recent work highlights the importance of perceived ingroup norms in shaping the success of depolarization interventions (You & Lee, 2024). In polarized settings, individuals often significantly overestimate their ingroup's negative sentiments toward the outgroup, and correcting these misperceptions has been shown to reduce polarization (You & Lee, 2024). In addition, evoking a more overarching norm of open-mindedness has been shown to diversify engagement with news content (Wojcieszak et al., 2020). Normative appeals to a broadly shared social identity—such as priming shared national identity or emphasizing common goals—have also been found to reduce partisan animosity in experimental settings (Huddy & Yair, 2021; Levendusky, 2018). Similarly, priming external threats reduced outgroup discrimination in experiments (Kaba et al., 2024).

Yet, recent research also suggests other factors that may reduce the effectiveness of norm interventions in highly polarized settings. For instance, when groups are affectively highly polarized, knowledge about outgroup norms may provoke reactance rather than alignment. For instance, experimental evidence from the Covid-19 pandemic shows that stressing the low mask usage among Trump supporters did not leave Biden supporters unaffected, but rather increased their own intentions to wear masks (Rand & Yoeli, 2024). Furthermore, as indicated in Section 1, not only do norms affect polarization, severe polarization can also harm democratic norms such as the norm of political tolerance—the belief that all citizens, including outgroup members, deserve equal rights such as rights to free speech, protest, and voting (Kingzette et al., 2021). First, partisans can selectively endorse constitutional protections depending on which party is in power. Second, when the outgroup is seen as a threat, norms of political tolerance lose support. Finally, in highly polarized contexts, norms can be rapidly redefined in response to perceived threats, as illustrated by the surge in Spanish nationalist displays following the Catalan independence referendum. This shift was not driven by changing preferences but by a transformation in perceived norms, which made previously stigmatized behaviors more socially acceptable (Dinas et al., 2024). Together, these findings indicate that social norms may lose their unifying function, become politicized, and even reinforce division in highly polarized contexts. Therefore, future research and interventions must account for the dynamics of norms in such settings.

Not only does the effectiveness of norms vary with the level of polarization and perceived threat, the broader intergroup context also matters; for instance, the severity and nature of intergroup conflict—such as whether two groups must co-exist in shared spaces, such as Hutus and Tutsis, or co-exist in neighboring spatial contexts with no need for group interaction, or can remain spatially separate to a large extent, such as Israelis and Palestinians (Ron et al., 2017). Furthermore, the relative size of in- and outgroups can affect norms toward positive intergroup contact (Christ et al., 2014).

Despite these advances, much remains unknown about how social norms are formed, transmitted, and contested in real-world polarized environments. This is particularly true in digital spaces, where norms may evolve rapidly and be enforced by informal or algorithmic mechanisms. Cross-cultural variation in norm sensitivity and enforcement also remains underexplored, limiting the generalizability of existing findings. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing more context-sensitive and norm-aware approaches to depolarization.

#### 4. Contributions to the Thematic issue

This thematic issue advances research on the role of social norms in (de-)polarization in four regards. First, several contributions study the role of social norms in fostering tolerance and depolarization. Estevan-Reina et al. (2025) tested whether the association between personal respect norms and tolerance of opposing opinions is moderated by the extremity of one's own opinion, the strength of disapproval of the opposing opinion, and the perceived threat from the out-group. Their results, based on a large-scale, cross-European survey, reveal that the association between personal respect norms and tolerance is unaffected by these three moderators. Furthermore, the pattern of results largely replicates across twelve countries and six controversial social topics, even when considering differences in political views. Thus, this article provides solid evidence for the robustness of the link between equality-based respect norms and tolerance for opposing opinions.

Gurbisz et al. (2025) examine the association between equality-based respect norms and two levels of tolerance, namely general tolerance, understood as an abstract principle, and specific tolerance, as applied in concrete, real-world situations. They conducted three studies in Poland focusing on tolerance toward Jewish people. The results show that perceived prescriptive equality-based respect norms were positively linked to tolerant attitudes. Additionally, the findings reveal a possible overestimation of tolerant attitudes when assessed at an abstract level, compared to when measured through concrete examples, highlighting the importance of studying how norms translate into behavior in specific contexts.

Ackermann et al. (2025) investigated different types of social norms that promote civic volunteering, a key indicator of social cohesion. They specifically examined the differential effects of perceptions of participatory norms (e.g., citizens should be active in social or political organizations, and base their consumption choices on ethical, environmental, or political reasoning) versus solidarity norms (e.g., citizens should help others in need inside and outside their own country) on volunteering. They used a large population survey in Germany to test these associations. Their findings stress the importance of fostering both participatory and solidarity norms to stimulate volunteering, which in turn strengthens social cohesion in polarized contexts.

Nijs (2025) shows that informing individuals about the actual descriptive norm can help mitigate negative consequences of polarization, especially when these individuals misperceive social norms. In a pre-registered survey experiment conducted in the Netherlands, he tested whether providing participants with accurate information about the descriptive norm (i.e., actual differences in immigration attitudes within society) would reduce the association between perceptions of polarization and polarization worry. He found that this is indeed the case, but only among participants who correctly understood the provided information and recognized that their beliefs were inaccurate.

Finally, Jaspers et al. (2025) examined the role of descriptive norms encouraging interethnic dating on interethnic dating in adolescence. Using Dutch longitudinal survey data, they found that descriptive norms moderated the association between attitudes toward other ethnic groups and interethnic dating, such that adolescents with positive outgroup attitudes in wave 1 were more likely to engage in interethnic dating in waves 2 and 3 when descriptive norms were more supportive of it.

Second, several contributions to this thematic issue examine the association between, on the one hand, norm deviations and behaviors that do not conform to societal norms (i.e., non-normative behaviors), and on the other hand, political polarization. Lutterbach and Beelmann (2025) examined the psychological foundations of political polarization among German youth. They showed that norm deviation and intolerance shape polarized political attitudes and behavioral intentions (including, among other factors, the rejection of democracy and human rights, and an affinity for political violence), with distinct patterns observed across different demographic groups. These results highlight the important role of tailored educational and preventive interventions to reduce polarization risks and promote social cohesion among adolescents.

Kesberg et al. (2025) tested the hypothesis that perceived societal polarization reduces trust in the government, particularly when the government is perceived as posing a threat to the ingroup, and that low trust, in turn, increases intentions to engage in non-normative collective action. The authors experimentally manipulated polarization and threat in the context of a fictitious country, and then measured participants' intentions to engage in normative (peaceful), non-normative (vandalizing and disruptive), and extreme non-normative (violent or radicalized) collective action, as well as their trust in the government of that country. They found that perceived threat, but not polarization itself, significantly increased collective action intentions, especially non-normative ones. These results reveal the importance of factors beyond norms, such as perceived threat, in shaping collective behavior in polarizing settings.

Third, social norms are contested and negotiated by competing groups, particularly in times of social upheaval or political realignment. In polarized societies, competing groups may promote conflicting normative expectations, leading to norm fragmentation or even norm conflict. For instance, what one group views as "free speech" may be perceived by another as "hate speech." Understanding how norms are enforced, resisted, or redefined in such contexts is crucial for grasping their role in either exacerbating or mitigating polarization. In this realm, Kłodkowski et al. (2025) propose a conceptual framework for identity politics, in which dialogue and negotiation processes about micro-identities defined as "a deeply subjective sense of belonging to an exceptionally specific and narrowly defined group" (p. 5) play a prominent role. These processes of identity negotiation can shape norms and thereby either exacerbate or bridge political cleavages, separating or bringing together oppositional opinion groups on highly polarized topics. The authors use the case study of the national discourse in Poland about the TERF label (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist) to illustrate a polarizing micro-identity strategy within feminism, and Polish politician Donald Tusk's electoral discourse to illustrate an integrative micro-identity strategy.

Bayarri-Toscano and Fernández-Villanueva (2025) explored how the circulation of memes on social media has contributed to the rise of far-right political parties in South American countries. Drawing on visual social media data and ethnographic fieldwork on recent electoral campaigns in Argentina, Brazil, and El Salvador, they explored the role of memes on social media and contextualized them in the affective climates surrounding electoral campaigns. Their analysis reveals that by transforming violent discourse into humorous memes, extreme right-wing parties normalized and legitimized violence against political adversaries, feminism, racialized persons, and people experiencing poverty, while deflecting accountability. In this context, humor functions as a mechanism for shaping social norms: it signals which forms of discourse are socially acceptable and influences public attitudes toward political violence. In doing so, memes become tools for reinforcing exclusionary norms and redefining the boundaries of permissible political expression.



Fourth, two articles in this thematic issue explore the impact of social networks, particularly their heterogeneity and the types of norms perceived within them (inclusive vs. exclusionary), on intergroup attitudes and behaviors that can facilitate depolarization (cf. Shepherd, 2017). Górska et al. (2025) focus on the role of diverse social networks in fostering tolerance toward opposing viewpoints. In a survey conducted in Poland, a highly polarized socio-political context, they examined whether network heterogeneity can be considered a distinct source of depolarization, separate from mere intergroup contact. Górska and colleagues show that having a more heterogeneous social network in terms of partisanship is indirectly associated with more positive attitudes toward political opponents. Additionally, this effect is independent of intergroup contact.

While it is well established that schools, families, peer groups, and digital platforms all play a role in shaping young people's early understanding of respectful or hostile political engagement, few studies have examined how early exposure to inclusive or exclusionary norms affects the development of political attitudes and intergroup behavior over time. Addressing this gap in a study in German secondary schools, Shani et al. (2025) innovatively employed a longitudinal approach to show that, whereas political ideological orientations fluctuate considerably during adolescence, youths' perceptions of social norms and their levels of affective polarization remain stable already from early adolescence onward. These findings underline the developmental fluidity and stability during adolescence, offering both opportunities and challenges for interventions. They suggest that effective depolarization strategies must account for the evolving nature of adolescent political socialization and the varying influence of school-based normative contexts.

## 5. Conclusions

The multidisciplinary contributions in this thematic issue demonstrate, both empirically and conceptually, how social norms can shape (de-)polarization. Drawing on evidence from diverse countries and topic areas, the studies highlight the central role of social norms in regulating intergroup attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions in polarized societies. One study shows that group-based differences in norm perceptions and polarization tendencies are already evident in early adolescence, even when political orientations remain fluid. Others highlight the robustness of equality-based respect norms in fostering tolerance, and the capacity of social norms to promote bridging behaviors, such as civic volunteering and interethnic dating. Conversely, the studies also draw attention to norm deviation as predictors of polarized behaviors. The contributions also emphasize the potential of norm-based interventions to reduce polarization and polarization anxieties, such as correcting misperceived descriptive norms. Furthermore, they reveal how contextual factors, such as perceived threat, social network heterogeneity, and identity politics in public discourse, moderate the influence of norms. Methodologically, the issue stressed the need to distinguish between abstract norm adherence and norm adherence in real-world contexts.

By bringing together interdisciplinary perspectives and diverse methodologies, this thematic issue paves the way for a broader research agenda on the role of social norms in fostering democratic behaviors and reducing polarization. We identify four key directions for future research. First, future work could consider the multiple environments in which prosocial norms emerge and are adopted and norm deviation discouraged, including schools and digital environments where norm violations can be amplified and rapidly disseminated. There is insufficient knowledge regarding how norms across different contexts interact. Ideally, such research would also contribute to a more multilevel understanding of social norms (Geber & Sedlander, 2022)—how they



operate across individual, group, institutional, and societal levels. Social network analysis could be further integrated in these initiatives to reveal how norms spread through social networks and how network structure influences the success of depolarization efforts.

Second, comparative cross-national studies are crucial for identifying the political, cultural, and institutional conditions that facilitate or hinder the acceptance of norms. While the contributions of this thematic issue offer valuable evidence, they primarily focus on so-called WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) societies. Extending empirical research to non-WEIRD contexts will provide a more complete understanding of cross-cultural variation in norm formation and enforcement and its intersection with polarization. Such an extension is also crucial for assessing the generalizability of existing findings across diverse sociopolitical environments.

Third, future research should investigate the mechanisms of norm perception, transmission, negotiation, and contestation in severely polarized environments as dynamic and context-dependent processes. Researchers could examine how norms are negotiated, reinterpreted, or resisted among competing groups, shaped by identity politics, and transformed in response to perceived threats or shifting social networks—processes that are central to understanding group alignment and resistance in polarized contexts. Both qualitative and quantitative research could contribute to such understanding. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the lives of inclusive norms, or how they emerge, strengthen, stabilize, mutate, erode, and disappear, particularly in response to shifting political climates.

Finally, while norm-based interventions are promising for reducing polarization, their long-term efficacy remains uncertain. Most studies are short-term and experimental, leaving open questions about the durability of their effects. More intervention-based research is needed that tests the effectiveness of norm-based strategies for depolarization in real-world settings, both in the short and long term. By addressing these questions, future research can help build a more comprehensive and globally relevant framework for understanding how social norms can be leveraged to promote inclusive and resilient societies.

### Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the Volkswagen Foundation for funding the project Inclusivity Norms to Counter Polarization in European Societies (INCLUSIVITY; 2021–2026, PIs: Maarten van Zalk [lead], Eva Jaspers, Oliver Christ, Marcin Bukowski, and Miranda J. Lubbers) that led to this thematic issue. For project descriptions, see: <https://osf.io/n7c4y> and <https://inclusivitynorms.com>. The authors also wish to thank the editorial team of *Social Inclusion* and the reviewers who made this thematic issue possible.

### Funding

This research was supported by the Volkswagen Foundation under the Inclusivity Norms to Counter Polarization in European Societies (INCLUSIVITY) project (9B060). The first author also acknowledges funding from the ICREA Acadèmia programme of the Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## References

- Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. A. (Eds.). (1990). *Social identity theory: Constructive and critical advances*. Springer.
- Ackermann, K., Mylius, J., Haussmann, A., & Wiloth, S. (2025). Living up to your own standards? Patterns of civic norms and volunteering in Germany. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 10007. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10007>
- Balafoutas, L., Dimant, E., Gächter, S., & Krupka, E. (2024). Social norms: Enforcement, breakdown & polarization. *European Economic Review*, 170, Article 104885. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eurocorev.2024.104885>
- Balcells, L., & Kuo, A. (2022). Secessionist conflict and affective polarization: Evidence from Catalonia. *Journal of Peace Research*, 60(4), 604–618. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221088112>
- Bayarri-Toscano, G., & Fernández-Villanueva, C. (2025). “Funny weapons”: The norms of humour in the construction of far-right political polarisation. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 10211. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10211>
- Bicchieri, C. (2006). *The grammar of society: The nature and dynamics of social norms*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bicchieri, C., Muldoon, R., & Sontuoso, A. (2023). Social norms. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/social-norms>
- Castle, J. (2018). New fronts in the culture wars? Religion, partisanship, and polarization on religious liberty and transgender rights in the United States. *American Politics Research*, 47(3), 650–679. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X18818169>
- Christ, O., Schmid, K., Lolliot, S., Swart, H., Stolle, D., Tausch, N., Al Ramiah, A., Wagner, U., Vertovec, S., & Hewstone, M. (2014). Contextual effect of positive intergroup contact on outgroup prejudice. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 111, 3996–4000. <http://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1320901111>
- Cialdini, R. B., Reno, R. R., & Kallgren, C. A. (1990). A focus theory of normative conduct: Recycling the concept of norms to reduce littering in public places. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 1015–1026. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.6.1015>
- Ciordia, A., Targarona Rifa, N., & Lubbers, M. J. (in press). The relational toll of political involvement in polarized times: relationship decay within activists’ personal networks. *American Behavioral Scientist*.
- Cole, J. C., Gillis, A. J., van der Linden, S., Cohen, M. A., & Vandenberg, M. P. (2025). Social psychological perspectives on political polarization: Insights and implications for climate change. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 20(1), 115–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916231186409>
- Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Harvard University Press.
- Davis, B., Goodliffe, J., & Hawkins, K. (2024). The two-way effects of populism on affective polarization. *Comparative Political Studies*, 58(1), 122–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140241237453>
- de Moor, J. (2017). Lifestyle politics and the concept of political participation. *Acta Politica*, 52(2), 179–197. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2015.27>
- DellaPosta, D., Shi, Y., & Macy, M. (2015). Why do liberals drink lattes? *American Journal of Sociology*, 120(5), 1473–1511. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681254>
- Dinas, E., Martínez, S., & Valentim, V. (2024). Social norm change, political symbols, and expression of stigmatized preferences. *The Journal of Politics*, 86(2), 488–506. <https://doi.org/10.1086/726951>
- Eriksson, K., Strimling, P., Gelfand, M., Wu, J., Abernathy, J., Akotia, C. S., Aldashev, A., Andersson, P. A., Andrighetto, G., Anum, A., Arian, G., Aycan, Z., Bagherian, F., Barrera, D., Basnight-Brown, D., Batkeyev, B.,

- Belaus, A., Berezina, E., Björnstjerna, M., . . . Van Lange, P. A. M. (2021). Perceptions of the appropriate response to norm violation in 57 societies. *Nature Communications*, 12(1), Article 1481. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-21602-9>
- Estevan-Reina, L., Schäfer, L. F., Middendorf, W., Bukowski, M., van Zalk, M., & Christ, O. (2025). Testing the robustness of the association between personal respect norms and tolerance in polarized contexts. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 10035. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10035>
- Geber, S., & Sedlander, E. (2022). Communication as the crucial link: Toward a multilevel approach to normative social influence. *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 22(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.24434/j.scoms.2022.02.005>
- Gidron, N., Adams, J., & Horne, W. (2020). *American affective polarization in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gidron, N., Adams, J., & Horne, W. (2023). Who dislikes whom? Affective polarization between pairs of parties in Western democracies. *British Journal of Political Science*, 53(3), 997–1015. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000394>
- González, R. (2025). The role of norms as promoters of social change. *Political Psychology*, 46(2), 455–481. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.13025>
- Górska, P., Bulska, D., & Górski, M. (2025). The more, the merrier...: The effect of social network heterogeneity on attitudes toward political opponents. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 10282. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10282>
- Gurbisz, D., Potoczek, A., Bukowski, M., Estevan-Reina, L., & Christ, O. (2025). Mind the gap! Linking equality-based respect norms with general and specific tolerance. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 10143. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10143>
- Harteveld, E., Mendoza, P., & Rooduijn, M. (2022). Affective polarization and the populist radical right: Creating the hating? *Government and Opposition*, 57(4), 703–727. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.31>
- Hecter, M., & Opp, K.-D. (Eds.). (2001). *Social norms*. Russel Sage Foundation.
- Hobolt, S. B., Leeper, T. J., & Tilley, J. (2021). Divided by the vote: Affective polarization in the wake of the Brexit referendum. *British Journal of Political Science*, 51, 1476–1493. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000125>
- Huddy, L., & Yair, O. (2021). Reducing affective polarization: Warm group relations or policy compromise? *Political Psychology*, 42, 291–309. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12699>
- Hunter, J. D. (1991). *Culture wars: The struggle to define America*. Basic Books.
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>
- Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 76, 405–431. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfs038>
- Iyengar, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2014). Fear and loathing across party lines: New evidence on group polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(3), 690–707. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24583091>
- Jaspers, E., Van Zantvliet, P. I., & Willems, J.-W. (2025). How descriptive norms and peer attitudes shape interethnic dating among adolescents in Dutch schools. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 10034. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10034>
- Jost, J. T., Baldassarri, D. S., & Druckman, J. N. (2022). Cognitive–motivational mechanisms of political polarization in social-communicative contexts. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1, 560–576. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00093-5>

- Kaba, M., Koyuncu, M., Schneider, S. O., & Sutter, M. (2024). Social norms, political polarization, and vaccination attitudes: Evidence from a survey experiment in Turkey. *European Economic Review*, 168, Article 104818. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2024.10481>
- Kesberg, R., Feddes, A. R., Vogel, E., & Rutjens, B. T. (2025). Associations between perceived societal polarisation and (extreme) non-normative attitudes and behaviour. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 10248. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10248>
- Kingzette, J., Druckman, J. N., Klar, S., Krupnikov, Y., Levendusky, M., & Ryan, J. B. (2021). How affective polarization undermines support for democratic norms. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 85(2), 663–677. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab029>
- Kłodkowski, P., Kossowska, M., & Siewierska, A. (2025). (Micro)Identities in flux: The interplay of polarization and fragmentation in Polish and European politics. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 9996. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.9996>
- Legros, S., & Cislighi, B. (2020). Mapping the social-norms literature: An overview of reviews. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(1), 62–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619866455>
- Levendusky, M. S. (2018). Americans, not partisans: Can priming American national identity reduce affective polarization? *Journal of Politics*, 80, 59–70. <https://doi.org/10.1086/693987>
- Lutterbach, S., & Beelmann, A. (2025). Youth norm deviation and intolerance: Pathways to polarized political attitudes and behavioral intentions. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 10019. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10019>
- McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. S. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62, 16–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576>
- McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2019). Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 234–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782>
- Meleady, R. (2021). “Nudging” intergroup contact: Normative social influences on intergroup contact engagement. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 24(7), 1180–1199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302211016047>
- Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Nijs, T. (2025). Breaking false polarization: How information on descriptive norms mitigates worry rooted in polarization (mis)perceptions. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 9904. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.9904>
- Orhan, Y. E. (2021). The relationship between affective polarization and democratic backsliding: Comparative evidence. *Democratization*, 29(4), 714–735. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.2008912>
- Phillips, J. (2022). Affective polarization: Over time, through the generations, and during the lifespan. *Political Behavior*, 44, 1483–1508. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09784-4>
- Prentice, D., & Paluck, E. L. (2020). Engineering social change using social norms: Lessons from the study of collective action. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 35, 138–142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.06.012>
- Rand, D. G., & Yoeli, E. (2024). Descriptive norms can “backfire” in hyper-polarized contexts. *PNAS Nexus*, 3(10), Article pgae303. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae303>
- Reiljan, A. (2019). ‘Fear and loathing across party lines’ (also) in Europe: Affective polarization in European party systems. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(2), 376–396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12351>
- Richters, S., Shani, M., Geyer, L., & Van Zalk, M. H. W. (2025). Differential effects of friendship and school norms on adolescents’ defending in cyberbullying situations: A randomized school-based experiment. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 54(7), 1677–1692. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-025-02202-y>

- Roberts, K. M. (2021). Populism and polarization in comparative perspective: Constitutive, spatial and institutional dimensions. *Government and Opposition*, 57(4), 680–702. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.14>
- Ron, Y., Solomon, J., Halperin, E., & Saguy, T. (2017). Willingness to engage in intergroup contact: A multilevel approach. *Peace and Conflict*, 23(3), 210–218. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000204>
- Schäfer, L. F., Tausch, N., Bukowski, M., Jaspers, E., Lubbers, M. J., van Zalk, M., Ciordia, C., Potoczek, A., Estevan-Reina, L., Shani, M., Simons, J.-W., Friehs, M.-T., Gurbisz, D., Middendorf, W., Schäfer, S. J., Ullenboom, J., Graf, S., Hjerme, M., Lavest, C., . . . Christ, O. (2024). *Inclusivity norms counter the negative societal effects of opinion polarization across 12 European countries*. OSF. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/9gh6k>
- Shani, M., Berns, M., Bergen, L., Richters, S., Krämer, K., de Lede, S., & Van Zalk, M. (2025). Longitudinal associations between perceived inclusivity norms and opinion polarization in adolescence. *Social Inclusion*, 13, Article 10122. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10122>
- Shani, M., de Lede, S., Richters, S., Kleuker, M., Middendorf, W., Liedtke, J., Wittola, S., & Van Zalk, M. (2023). A social network intervention to improve adolescents' intergroup tolerance via norms of equality-based respect: The "Together for Tolerance" feasibility study. *International Journal of Developmental Science*, 17(1/3), 93–110. <https://doi.org/10.3233/DEV-230342>
- Shepherd, H. (2017). The structure of perception: How networks shape ideas of norms. *Sociological Forum*, 32(1), 72–93. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12317>
- Simons, J. W., Jaspers, E., & Van Tubergen, F. (2025). Socialisation and ethnic minorities' attitudes towards ethnic minorities: A systematic review and meta-analysis of correlational evidence. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 51(11), 2669–2694. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2472818>
- Stavrakakis, Y. (2018). Paradoxes of polarization: Democracy's inherent division and the (anti-) populist challenge. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 43–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218756924>
- Suarez Estrada, M., Juarez, Y., & Piña-García, C. A. (2022). Toxic social media: Affective polarization after feminist protests. *Social Media + Society*, 8(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221098343>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- Tankard, M. E., & Paluck, E. L. (2016). Norm perception as a vehicle for social change. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 10(1), 181–211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12022>
- Tausch, N., Birtel, M. D., Górka, P., Bode, S., & Rocha, C. (2024). A post-Brexit intergroup contact intervention reduces affective polarization between Leavers and Remainers short-term. *Communications Psychology*, 2, Article 95. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44271-024-00146-w>
- Urbanati, N. (2019). *Me the people: How populism transforms democracy*. Harvard University Press.
- Voelkel, J. G., Chu, J., Stagnaro, M., Mernyk, J., Redekopp, C., Pink, S., Druckman, J., Rand, D., & Willer, R. (2022). Interventions reducing affective polarization do not necessarily improve anti-democratic attitudes. *Nature Human Behavior*, 7, 55–64. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01466-9>
- Wojcieszak, M., Winter, S., & Yu, X. (2020). Social norms and selectivity: Effects of norms of open-mindedness on content selection and affective polarization. *Mass Communication and Society*, 23(4), 455–483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2020.1714663>
- You, Z. T., & Lee, S. W. S. (2024). Explanations of and interventions against affective polarization cannot afford to ignore the power of ingroup norm perception. *PNAS Nexus*, 3(10), Article pgae286. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae286>



## About the Authors



**Miranda J. Lubbers** is a full professor of social and cultural anthropology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, who investigates social networks, social cohesion, and social inclusion.



**Marcin Bukowski** is a professor at the Jagiellonian University (Institute of Psychology) and a member of the Centre for Social Cognitive Studies in Kraków, Poland. His research interests focus mainly on motivated social cognition and the psychology of intergroup relations.



**Oliver Christ** is a full professor at the FernUniversität in Hagen (Faculty of Psychology), Germany. His research interests focus mainly on the social psychology of intergroup relations.



**Eva Jaspers** is a full professor of empirical and theoretical sociology at Utrecht University. Her research is on gender, sexual, and racial/ethnic diversity from an interactional or network perspective. She aims to understand how people's interactions and relations with (dis)similar others shape their patterns of behavior and their outcomes at school, work, and at home.



**Maarten van Zalk** is a full professor of developmental psychology at Osnabrück University who focuses on adolescent development of intergroup relations, social relationships, and antisocial behavior.