

**IN SEARCH OF MODERATION: HOW COUNTER-
STEREOTYPICAL ENDORSERS ATTENUATE POLARIZATION OVER
PUBLIC POLICIES**

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Keywords: Polarization, Counter-stereotypical Endorser, Political Ideology, Public Policy

Description: This paper shows that counter-stereotypical endorsers (e.g., a conservative politician supporting cannabis legalization or a liberal politician supporting gun rights) attenuate polarization over public policies by persuading more their in-groups than by dissuading their out-groups.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

Political polarization is rising worldwide. As political orientation becomes increasingly central to people's identities, preferences become more clearly defined along ideological lines. Indeed, political orientation has been shown to predict policy opinion on a range of social issues nearly three times as well as other relevant socio-demographic variables, such as race and gender.

Although much has been documented on how political orientation helps explain divergent opinions and tastes, much less is known on what can bring them together. In other words, what can lead preferences to converge across the ideological spectrum, and why? Across three studies, we show that counter-stereotypical endorsers (e.g., a conservative politician who supports cannabis legalization) systematically attenuate the well-established association between self-identified political orientation and policy preferences. Further, we demonstrate that such attenuation occurs asymmetrically: when a counter-stereotypical endorser supports a policy, it persuades in-groups (e.g., increases support for cannabis among conservative individuals) more than it dissuades out-groups (e.g., reduces support for cannabis among liberal individuals). Finally, by conducting our studies in Brazil, a highly fragmented multi-party system, we move the debate away from the US and the "party over policy" effect to demonstrate that general political orientation also has a social-based influence into policy preferences.

Method And Data

Study 1 used a real-world context to provide initial evidence for the asymmetric attenuation effect. Participants (N = 226) recruited on the streets of Rio de Janeiro were asked to indicate their opinion about an actual cannabis-related bill after learning that either a famous left-wing (stereotypical) or a famous center-right (counter-stereotypical) politician supported it (both actually did).

Study 2 aimed to replicate the effects with a stereotypical right-wing policy (i.e., gun rights). To enhance internal validity, instead of using real politicians, study 2 identified the

endorsers based on their political orientation. Participants ($N = 342$) recruited through a Brazilian online panel read that a bill seeking to increase access to guns has received increasing support from conservative (stereotypical), liberal (counter-stereotypical) or some (control condition) congressmen, and then indicated their opinion about the bill. Study 3 ($N = 412$) employed a similar procedure, with three exceptions. First, we used an even more salient policy: abortion. Second, we excluded the stereotypical condition since it resembled the control. Third, we employed a 3-item measure of beliefs about the policy effectiveness to examine whether changes in preferences operated through changes in beliefs. In all studies, participants completed a continuous measure of political orientation.

Summary of Findings

Across studies, political orientation was a strong predictor of preferences in the stereotypical and control conditions (p 's $\leq .001$): as conservatism increased, support for cannabis and abortion decreased, and support for gun rights increased. However, the interaction between political orientation and counter-stereotypical endorser was significant in all studies (p 's $\leq .05$): when the endorser was counter-stereotypical, the effect of political orientation attenuated. Spotlight analyses revealed that such attenuation was driven more by in-group persuasion than by out-group dissuasion. A conservative endorser supporting cannabis and abortion swayed conservatives (p 's $\leq .029$), but liberals hardly change their opinions (p 's $\geq .290$). A liberal endorser supporting gun rights increased support among liberals ($p = .002$), but did not dissuade conservatives ($p = .290$).

This asymmetric change in preferences did not originate from a change in beliefs about policy effectiveness (study 3). The interaction between political orientation and endorser did not predict beliefs ($p = .258$), and the indirect effect of political orientation on abortion preferences through beliefs did not differ across conditions ($p = .290$). However, the indirect effect of political orientation on beliefs through preferences significantly differed across conditions ($p = .039$), which suggests that beliefs are updated given the new preferences.

Statement of Key Contributions

While research has consistently documented that political orientation is a strong predictor of preferences, much less is known about what can make liberals and conservatives to converge. Across three studies, we systematically demonstrate that counter-stereotypical endorsers attenuate polarization over policy preferences. Further, we document that this attenuation happens asymmetrically. When a counter-stereotypical endorser supports a policy, it persuades in-groups more than it dissuades out-groups. By considering the role of policy stereotypes, we help reconcile conflicting findings in the literature about asymmetric effects of endorsement cues. Finally, we conducted our studies in Brazil, a highly fragmented multi-party system. This context is particularly suitable to assess the extent to which general political orientation plays a social-based role into policy preferences.

This research also offers important practical contributions. In a highly polarized world, persuading people to support policies perceived to be associated with a given political group (e.g., cannabis legalization, abortion rights) is a key challenge often faced by policy-makers and by people in everyday interactions. Our findings suggest that counter-stereotypical endorsements significantly attenuate polarization, and do so more by persuading in-groups than by dissuading out-groups. Taken together, our results highlight the potential of counter-stereotypical endorsements as a persuasion tool to reduce polarization.