

Political Polarization: Challenges, Opportunity, and Hope

The Problem: Since 1994, American political values have shifted from a unimodal distribution to a bimodal distribution, driving political attitudes toward ideological extremes and away from the center. Consequently, societal issues, both directly (e.g. abortion, immigration, LGBT rights) and indirectly (e.g. vaccines, environmental conservation, energy sourcing) related to politics have seen political divisiveness driving difficulty in mobilizing support to solve issues. Of greatest concern is the tendency of individuals both liberal and conservative to reject scientific or objective viewpoints in favor of opinions conforming to their ideology.

One might be tempted to blame ignorance or naivety for this vexing problem. However, research suggests scientific literacy or formal education does not ameliorate motivated reasoning. For instance, Kahan and colleagues (2012) find that scientific literacy drives *lower* belief in global warming for individuals who were conservative, suggesting that partisans with greater knowledge develop more elaborate counter-arguments making them even harder to persuade. Further, when individuals become more invested in their ideology and lack trust in the government and/or media, they are even more likely to endorse conspiracy theories, such as those increasingly promoted through “fake news”.

Because marketing is the most effective way to communicate information, political polarization represents an opportunity for marketers to help society. However, research in marketing addressing the outcomes of polarization is virtually nonexistent.

Track Goal: This 2019 TCR Conference track will unite researchers and those responsible for communicating scientific viewpoints to the public to assess where polarization is affecting society and then try to discover new strategies to overcome it.

Specifically, this track will look to better understand: 1) the types of information that can drive miscommunication in a polarized environment, 2) the types of contexts that attract questionable information, and, 3) prospective marketing cures to these messaging problems.

Our Team

T.J. Weber, Ph.D.

T.J. Weber is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the Orfalea College of Business, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. T.J.'s research focuses on how marketing can be used to improve consumer decision-making. In 2015, his research on online comments and vaccination beliefs was published in the *Journal of Advertising*, leading to media coverage in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *LA Times*. His in-process research examines how political values affects consumption. T.J. received his B.S. from Northern Michigan University in marketing, M.B.A. from Marquette University, and Ph.D. from the Carson College of Business at Washington State University.



Chris Hydock, Ph.D.

Chris Hydock is an Assistant Professor of Research in Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business. In his research, Professor Hydock seeks to impact both theory and practice while promoting consumer interests. He focuses on contextual factors that influence consumption decisions; this includes one stream of work that examines managerial questions by using and improving on existing theories of consumer behavior and a second stream that examines the burgeoning phenomena of brand involvement in divisive political issues. Professor Hydock received his Phd in Cognitive Neuroscience from George Washington University, and his BA in Psychology from the University of Colorado.



Dave Sprott, Ph.D.

David E. Sprott is Dean and Professor at the College of Business at the University of Wyoming. Dr. Sprott served on faculty at Washington State University for over 2 decades and is also on faculty at the University of St Gallen in Switzerland. He received his bachelors and MBA from Kent State University and a Ph.D. in marketing from the University of South Carolina. Professor Sprott's research interests include: retailing, branding, influence strategies and marketing public policy. His research has been published in journals such as *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, and *Journal of Marketing Research*.

Janine Beekman, Ph.D.

Janine Beekman is an Associate Research Scientist at Ipsos Public Affairs. Her work investigates the impacts of social stressors and norms on factors related to health, safety, wellness, and decision-making. She has a keen interest in applying experimental methods to predict socio-political attitudes and behavior. Dr. Beekman leads behavioral science research projects for private and government clients such as the DHA, FDA, and Ad Council, as well as social and opinion research for public release for Reuters, NPR, USA Today, and others. She teaches University courses in Psychology, and received her PhD in Social Psychology from The George Washington University.