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THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND A WAY OUT OF IT

Abstract: Since political polarization significantly impacts contemporary politics and democracy, much of the research in the social sciences is dedicated to this topic. In recent times, philosophers joined the discussion related to the research on political polarization, primarily in the fields of political philosophy and political epistemology. The main aim of this paper is philosophical analysis of some dominant explanations of political polarization, but also to propose solutions for a way out of political polarization from the perspective of political philosophy. In a nutshell, to find solutions for a way out of political polarization, I will be looking in the direction of boosting epistemic rationality and fostering communication in conditions of tolerance and equality.

Key words: political polarization, motivated reasoning, rationality, public deliberation

Introduction

Since political polarization significantly impacts contemporary politics and democracy, much of the research in the social sciences is dedicated to this topic. In recent times, philosophers joined the discussion related to the research on political polarization, primarily in the fields of political philosophy and political epistemology. Robert Talisse's definition of political polarization will be used as a starting point: "Political polarization denotes a family of phenomena having to do with what might be called the *political distance* between political opponents and the consequent dissolution of common ground between them." (Talisse 2021: 209). The main aim of this paper is philosophical analysis of some dominant explanations of political polarization, but also to propose solutions for a way out

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of political polarization from the perspective of political philosophy. In a nutshell, to find solutions for a way out of political polarization, I will be looking in the direction of boosting epistemic rationality and fostering communication in conditions of tolerance and equality.

1.

There is a scientific consensus among environmental scientists that climate change is happening and is caused by anthropogenic factors (Oreskes 2004, Cook et al 2016). Taking into account the scientific consensus, it may appear surprising that a significant number of people who do not engage in science reject the evidence on climate change.[1] The simplest explanation would be that people who reject the scientific consensus are not sufficiently informed about climate change. However, research has shown that among people who reject scientific knowledge about climate change there is a significant number of those who are well-informed and clearly understand the conclusions reached by science (Kahan et al 2012). This opens a question how could one understand a tendency to reject and deny scientific knowledge on climate change, given that the facts and the conclusions reached by science are accessible to those who reject them.

Rejection of scientific knowledge on climate change is just one example of a recent phenomenon of rejection on the part of the general public of some scientific theories or of science as a whole. This phenomenon is also a subject of numerous topical research, primarily in the fields of psychology and other social sciences. This research goes into two directions. One is identification of psychological mechanisms which can explain the phenomenon, and the other concerns identification of political factors impacting rejection of science. In fact, even though they represent two different strands of research, they are often viewed as complementary parts of a comprehensive explanation of the science denialism.

Recent review of the science denialism explanations in the field of psychology points to motivated cognition characterized by the following elements: reliance on heuristics, differential risk perception and a tenden-

1 The research on the rejection of environmental science usually refer to US data. These data show that while until 1970s there existed a consensus regarding environmental issues, polarization first occurred in the Congress, where by 1990s the gap has become apparent as Republican Party representatives started voting against environmental legislation. This political polarization was subsequently reflected in views of the general public so that a significant change in attitudes occurred in a relatively short time period – the difference between those supporting the Democrats and the Republicans regarding climate change increased in the period from 2006 to 2016 from 25% to 46%. For the aforementioned data see: Bayes and Druckman 2021: 27.

cy towards believing in conspiracy theories (Lewandowsky and Oberauer 2016). Contemporary psychology offered a lot of evidence that people often do not make decisions on rational grounds (in line with the assumptions of rational choice theory and decision theory) and that they do it in intuitive way, by using simple heuristics. Such heuristics can sometimes be useful and lead to good solutions. For that reason, it is considered that bounded rationality although may not lead to the best, may lead to sufficiently good decisions and solutions. Moreover, relying on heuristics can sometimes lead to better outcomes than decision-making in accordance with the rules that are characteristic for rational choice theory and decision theory (Gigerenzer 2007). However, relying on certain heuristics may also have adverse consequences, which is why it can be considered irrational, given the deviation from the cannons of rationality (Ariely 2008).[2]

In their study, Lewandowsky and Oberauer seem to have in mind the latter understanding of heuristics. Understood in this way, rejection of scientific knowledge on climate change suggests that a person does not take into account available evidence in a rational way. Motivated cognition implies that a person is inclined toward rejection of evidence and scientific knowledge if such evidence and knowledge is not in line with her prior attitudes and beliefs. So, when someone is rejecting climate science, that person is under the influence of mechanisms that protect her prior attitudes and beliefs from exposure to evidence that is not in line with it. This is precisely the point where the political dimension of the science denialism plays decisive role, given that the person engaging in such rejection usually attempts to protect her own *political* attitudes and beliefs. Motivation also affects a differential risk perception, so that those who due to their political attitudes and beliefs reject evidence on climate change usually underestimate its risks. In addition, Lewandowsky and his colleagues in their research payed particular attention to the third element of motivated cognition at work when rejecting science – the tendency towards believing in conspiracy theories (Lewandowsky et al 2013).

Concerning political dimension of the science denialism, Lewandowsky and Oberauer point out that although motivated cognition indicates individual irrationality, there are certain political and economic actors for which incentivizing such a relationship toward science is fully rational because it furthers realization of their political or economic goals.[3] They term this political aspect of the science denialism "institutionally or-

2 This can be explained by the fact that even though heuristics are adaptations, many of them are adaptations to ways of life in which people found themselves in distant past. On adaptive characteristics of heuristics see: Gigerenzer 2007: Chapter 4.

3 See also: Lewandowsky et al. 2018: 188–190.

ganized denial" and conclude that "although the rejection of science may be driven by a common set of cognitive processes, it is clear that political, ideological, and economic factors are paramount" and that "the communication of contested science is therefore inextricably caught up in political battles" (Lewandowsky and Oberauer 2016: 220).

In addition to predominantly psychological explanations, philosophical explanations of the rejection of science and scientific knowledge have recently also been formulated. Relying on psychological research, Neil Levy offered several additional explanations from the perspective of epistemology (Levy 2019). We have seen that psychological explanations are largely based on heuristics that may lead to rejection of evidence and scientific knowledge. Levy explains that people's inclination toward those heuristics, even though it may individually lead to a path of acquiring a wrong belief, can collectively be understood as a kind of adaptation for collective deliberation.[4] Namely, acquiring and firm adherence to various beliefs, even wrong beliefs, may actually contribute to the quality of collective deliberation because it brings in a larger number of perspectives, which necessitates arguing about which beliefs should be adopted and which ones rejected. In the case of inexistence of a multitude of perspectives and the consequent necessity to advocate one's own belief, it would be much easier for certain wrong beliefs to be adopted at the collective level.

Levy alternatively expresses this idea in terms of epistemic individualism (Levy 2019: 314). Epistemic individualism can be understood as people's inclination to give advantage to their own beliefs over the beliefs of other people.[5] The inclination toward epistemic individualism, even though it can lead to acquiring and adhering to wrong beliefs at the individual level can be understood as an adaptation for collective deliberation. Taking this into account, paradoxically, there are two tendencies that appear to be relevant for explaining the phenomenon of rejecting science and scientific knowledge. On the one hand, epistemic individualism explains why some people are inclined to reject results of collective deliberation arrived at, for example, by the scientific community. On the other hand, given that epistemic individualism is an adaptation for collective deliberation, people should also have an inclination to adhere to beliefs

4 In this regard, Levy relies on Mercier and Sperber's research on reasoning and argumentation: Mercier and Sperber 2011. I will discuss Mercier and Sperber's theory in more detail in the fourth section of this paper.

5 Michael Lynch points to a similar phenomenon that contributes to disagreement among people which he terms intellectual arrogance: "*Intellectual arrogance* is the psycho-social attitude that you have nothing to learn from anyone else about some subject or subjects because you know it all already. This is the arrogance of the know-it-all" (Lynch 2021: 252).

that are collectively accepted on the basis of evidence and argumentation. Why then all people do not believe in knowledge on climate change that is the result of collective deliberation within the scientific community?

To answer this question, Levy also thinks that a part of the explanation lies in political factors. However, he approaches the explanation from an epistemic perspective. In order to understand why there is a rejection of science and scientific knowledge, it should first be understood why there is acceptance of scientific results by the general public. That is, why people who are assumed to be epistemic individualists come to accept the results of collective deliberation. Levy suggests that the development of science from the 16th century onwards is not only a product of collective deliberation, but also of institutionalized collective deliberation (Levy 2019: 317). It means that a large portion of scientific success rests on institutional mechanisms which lead to reliable knowledge due to productive disagreement (for example, through anonymous reviews before academic findings are published, but also due to critical discussions within scientific community once they have been published).

For scientific knowledge to be accepted by the general public, not only the aspect of reliability but also the aspect of benevolence is important. In this regard, Levy maintains that when explaining rejection of scientific knowledge and testimony offered by scientific theories, political factors should also be considered. Namely, in the case when science itself is politicized, suspicion concerning its benevolence may lead to a rejection of its reliability. Thus, according to Levy, an important part of the explanation why a portion of the general public rejects scientific knowledge on climate change is that this knowledge is politicized, i.e., understood as expressing attitudes typical of a specific political viewpoint. So, those who reject it do not reject it as scientific knowledge, but as political views that are opposed to their political views.

In this section, I examined several explanations of the contemporary phenomenon of rejecting science and scientific knowledge. I illustrated this problem with a topical example of climate change, on which there is a scientific consensus, but which a portion of the general public nevertheless rejects. I have considered some dominant explanations both from the perspective of psychology and philosophy. Both types of explanations point to psychological mechanisms and political factors that impact rejection of scientific knowledge. In this section, I have tackled a specific example of rejecting scientific knowledge on climate change in the light of general types of explanation of this phenomenon from the perspective of psychology and philosophy. In the following two sections, I will tackle more general phenomenon of political polarization, focusing on specific mechanisms on which explanations of this phenomenon are based.

2.

An explanation for political polarization offered by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt is largely based on previously identified elements – motivated cognition and political factors (Haidt 2013). An integral part of the explanation is based on his empirical research concerning the foundations of morality (and in particular, moral foundations of politics). His comprehensive explanation of political polarization consists therefore of three parts. The first part of the explanation is characterized by Haidt's view that "*intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second*" (Haidt 2013: xiv). This view implies that people often make decisions by relying on intuition and heuristics. Haidt's view suggests not only that intuition in temporal sense precedes rational thinking and reasoning, but also that an exercise of rational faculties can only be seen as a justification of previously given intuitions a person has. In other words, people are mostly guided by their intuitions that do not have rational grounds, while using rational reasoning mostly in order to justify intuitions they already have. The second part of the explanation is characterized by the view that "*there's more to morality than harm and fairness*" (Haidt 2013: xv). Haidt argues that political polarization largely stems from differing foundations of morality people rely on in order to ground their political (primarily ideological) views. Finally, the third part of the explanation is based on the view that "*morality binds and blinds*", referring to political significance of identification with a specific group, for which Haidt finds sources within evolutionary theory, more specifically a (recent) theory of group selection (Haidt 2013: xvi).

Haidt places particular emphasis on two psychological mechanisms related to the view that "*intuitions come first, reasoning second*", which are particularly relevant for explaining political polarization. These psychological mechanisms are *biased confirmation* and *motivated reasoning*. In regard to biased confirmation, Haidt refers to well-known studies within psychology. For example, he points to a significance of the experiment carried out by Wason regarding "the 2–4–6 problem" (Haidt 2013: 92). In this experiment, the respondents were given a series of numbers "2–4–6" and they were asked to provide other number series to the experimenter in order to establish a pattern according to which the numbers had been ordered. The experiment showed that the respondents mostly cited series of numbers which confirmed the pattern they themselves assumed in advance, usually assuming that for any additional number one should add "+2" which is wrong because the experimenter had assumed a pattern of a series of numbers in which each successive number was greater than the previous one. This research has shown that people usually search for information that confirms their previous beliefs or assumptions rather than

the information that exposes their assumptions to being falsified. Given that in those cases people exclusively seek the information or evidence that confirms their previous beliefs and assumptions, this type of behavior has been termed *biased confirmation*.[6]

Motivated reasoning is a similar psychological mechanism which differs from biased confirmation because once it is engaged in reasoning, a person disregards or rejects the information not in line with her previous attitudes or beliefs. Haidt illustrates the distinction in the following way. In the case of biased confirmation, a person asks herself "Can I believe it?" and replies "Yes" if she finds evidence or pseudo-evidence that confirms her belief, while in the case of motivated reasoning, a person asks herself "Must I believe it?" and rejects the belief if she finds any sort of information that would undermine it (Haidt 2013: 98).

Ziva Kunda suggested, back in the 1990s, that the experimental evidence from various fields of psychological research points into the direction of the unique mechanism of motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990).[7] About the mechanism of motivated reasoning she says the following:

> "I propose that people motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion attempt to be rational and to construct a justification of their desired conclusion that would persuade a dispassionate observer. They draw the desired conclusion only if they can muster up the evidence necessary to support it... In other words, they maintain an "illusion of objectivity"... The objectivity of this justification construction process is illusory because people do not realize that the process is biased by their goals, that they are accessing only a subset of their relevant knowledge, that they would probably access different beliefs and rules in the presence of different directional goals, and that they might even be capable of justifying opposite conclusions on different occasions." (Kunda 1990: 486)

The formulation that in the course of motivated reasoning people „attempt to be rational" should not be misunderstood. It merely means that people use their rational faculties to justify their desired conclusion which has already been determined in advance by their directional goals (previous attitudes and motivation). The reasoning process is therefore basically irrational despite the use of rational faculties. For that reason, motivated reasoning is one of the mechanisms which shows that, in Haidt's words, "*intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second*". The workings of the

6 For numerous other experiments concerning biased confirmation see: Nickerson 1998.

7 For the sake of precision, it should be noted that her paper strives to identify even more basic mechanisms found in the root of motivated reasoning that pertain to selective approach to memory and construction of beliefs. In retrospect, it seems that her paper has had a much larger influence regarding identification of the mechanism of motivated reasoning rather than these more basic mechanisms.

mechanism of motivated reasoning can be illustrated by the experiment carried out by Lord, Ross and Lepper regarding different views on capital punishment (Lord, Ross and Lepper 1979). In this experiment, the participants who opposed capital punishment as well as those in favor of capital punishment were given articles to read that contained arguments for and against capital punishment. The experiment showed that those who were in favor of capital punishment saw the articles as an additional confirmation of their prior views and vice versa.[8]

So, the first part of Haidt's explanation of political polarization is based on mechanisms of biased confirmation and motivated reasoning which show that the process of reasoning does not necessarily lead to rationally-based conclusions and beliefs. The second part of the explanation refers to different sources of moral intuitions people have. This part of the explanation is based on Haidt's research on foundations of morality and their political implications. Namely, Haidt and his colleagues have tried to identify modules behind various moral intuitions, building on insights from evolutionary psychology. On the basis of their research, they came to the conclusion that points to (at least) six sources of moral intuitions. These are the following foundations of morality: care, fairness, liberty, authority, loyalty and sanctity (Haidt 2013).

In what way are these foundations of morality relevant for understanding political polarization? The experiments conducted by Haidt and his colleagues show that research on foundations of morality has clear political implications. The conclusion they reached is that people who have liberal political views mostly ground their beliefs on three former foundations of morality (care, fairness, liberty), while those who have conservative political views ground their political beliefs on all six foundations of morality (although authority, loyalty and sanctity have crucial importance for them, while they interpret the former three in a way different from people with liberal views). The divergence of moral intuitions that have their political significance largely derives, in Haidt's opinion, from different moral foundations in which liberal and conservative views are grounded. Thus, it is largely because of the differences in foundations of morality of liberal and conservative views that people may end up in political polarization.[9]

However, the insight that "*there's more to morality than harm and fairness*", according to Haidt, is still not sufficient to explain political polarization. The third part of the explanation is also necessary, showing that

8 For numerous other experiments regarding motivated reasoning see: Kunda 1990.

9 Haidt notes that this ideological division is associated with the USA, where liberal orientation includes left-wing ideological views (Haidt 2013: xvii).

"*morality binds and blinds*". This part of the explanation is based on evolutionary biology, more specifically on multilevel selection. However, Haidt focuses on only two levels, the collective level and the individual level. He considers acceptable explanations of cooperation from the "selfish gene" perspective by means of a mechanism of reciprocal altruism, rejecting however the assumption that human cooperation can be explained only from such an individualistic perspective. He argues that the most recent findings on group selection also have to be taken into account. The point is that morality appeared largely a result of group selection, i.e., morality emerged due to the situations of conflict among groups. Given that cooperation has primarily developed within groups, it has led to parochial altruism which boosts cooperation within one's own group. Hostile feelings towards other groups can also be explained from this collective perspective. So, on Haidt's view, "*morality binds and blinds*" because people are bound primarily to members of their own group and beliefs they share.

This part of the explanation from the perspective of group selection is, according to Haidt, crucially important for understanding the phenomenon of political polarization. Haidt says that, "these tribal instincts are a kind of overlay, a set of groupish emotions and mental mechanisms laid down over our older and more selfish primate nature. It may sound depressing to think that our righteous minds are basically tribal minds, but consider the alternative. Our tribal minds make it easy to divide us, but without our long period of tribal living there'd be nothing to divide in the first place." (Haidt 2013: 246). So, political polarization does not emerge only because "righteous minds" are based on different foundations of morality, but also because people are inclined to side and identify with their own group, i.e., to consider views typical of the group they identify with correct and the views of opposing groups wrong. Finally, given that "*intuitions come first, reasoning second*", the sort of beliefs a person will accept or reject largely depends on whether they are in accordance with convictions of the group she identifies with.

Haidt thinks that realizing that there are foundations of morality on which different political (primarily ideological) convictions and beliefs are based may help not only explain, but also overcome political polarization. The route to a way out of political polarization would consist of better understanding of the reasons people have for different political views. But, aside from pointing out that better understanding of different foundations of morality may lead to better understanding of other people, subsequently leading to a realization of certain correct views in the political standpoint of an opponent, Haidt does not offer any institutional mechanism of political decision-making that would lead towards overcoming or at least

reducing political polarization. Moreover, people may gain a better understanding of why other people have attitudes and beliefs they do, and still continue to disagree with them. Better understanding of attitudes and beliefs of other people, does not necessarily lead toward overcoming or reducing political polarization. However, this is not to deny that it may be an important step in that direction.

There is also another problem with Haidt's explanation of political polarization. Namely, Haidt's emphasis on people being intuitive rather than rational beings, his emphasis of authority, loyalty and sanctity as foundations of morality, and on collective identity and collective values, overlaps with some of the basic tenets of conservative political views. This is problematic, because then research on political polarization between liberal and conservative views is largely based on prior acceptance of conservative views, which at the same time purport to be the object of analysis. Haidt himself admits that reading works of conservative political theorists has led him to realize this overlap with their views (Haidt 2013: 338). He also defends the conception of "Durkheimian utilitarianism" acceding greater correctness to such collectivistic conservative views inasmuch as they contribute to greater degree of happiness. The problem is that Haidt's views may lead to political polarization with respect to science, which is contrary to any rapprochement of political standpoints he allegedly advocates.

3.

The explanatory framework extrapolated in the previous section has recently been additionally specified inasmuch as *politically motivated reasoning* had been isolated as a basic psychological mechanism leading to political polarization. For that reason, methodology and specific experimental design that explore in what way politically motivated reasoning leads to political polarization have been laid out. As a part of this approach, issues of rationality and irrationality of politically motivated reasoning have been investigated, as well as whether it is a phenomenon typical of specific (mostly conservative) ideological view or whether there is a symmetry between different ideological orientations regarding political polarization.

Kahan and his colleagues conducted a series of experiments which demonstrate that *politically motivated reasoning* may be conceived as the main psychological mechanism behind political polarization (Kahan 2016a). In his research, Kahan starts from the assumption that contemporary political life is largely characterized by disagreement on factual mat-

ters, for example, whether climate change is happening. Given that factual issues are concerned, it is obvious that those who disagree do not do so on the basis of evidence, but on the basis of values.

However, in any explanation of political polarization, according to Kahan, a key role has to be played by specifically political and ideological values on which group identity rests. When engaged in politically motivated reasoning, people will be prone to reject evidence to the extent that it contradicts the view of the group they identify with. On Kahan's view, an important characteristic of politically motivated reasoning is precisely protection and defense of identity typical of the group with specific political and ideological values. Thus, politically motivated reasoning leads to "*identity-protective cognition*" (Kahan 2017: 1). Kahan summarizes his view on politically motivated reasoning in the following way:

> "Where positions on some policy-relevant fact have assumed widespread recognition as a badge of membership within identity-defining affinity groups, individuals can be expected to selectively credit all manner of information in patterns consistent with their respective groups' positions. The beliefs generated by this form of reasoning excite behavior that expresses individuals' group identities. Such behavior protects their connection to others with whom they share communal ties" (Kahan 2016a: 2)

And this leads, according to Kahan, to the following concequences:

> "When individuals apprehend – largely unconsciously – that holding one or another position is critical to conveying *who they are* and *whose side they are on,* they engage information in a manner geared to generating identity-consistent rather than factually accurate beliefs." (Kahan 2017: 6)

The explanation of political polarization on factual matters therefore lies in the way of reasoning individuals resort to in order to express and protect their political identity that essentially boils down to an identity of a specific political group or a group sharing common ideological convictions. Therefore, to the extent to which people reason in this way, they are prone to reject evidence which questions the values of the group they identify with. Kahan and his colleagues investigated this effect in the experiment which largely addresses polarization on climate change that was discussed in the first section of this paper (Kahan et al. 2011, Kahan 2016a).

In the experiment, respondents first read a short bio of a person they are told was an expert in the field of climate change. This basic information is such that on the basis of it, anyone could easily come to the conclusion that the person indeed was an expert in that field. However, after this initial piece of information, the respondents in the second part of the experiment are informed that the given person maintained that there was

a high risk (and alternatively a low risk) regarding climate change. We have seen in the first section that an important characteristic of motivated cognition regarding climate change was a differential risk perception. Relatedly, the experiment demonstrated that the additional information regarding climate change risk largely influenced the original assessment whether the person was an expert on environmental issues. Namely, the respondents of conservative ideological orientation were prone to believe that the person was not an expert if they received additional information about the person's belief in the high climate change risk, while persons of liberal political orientation regarded the same person as an expert in the light of the same piece of information. What this experiment demonstrates is that political and ideological factors may affect the judgement on whether someone was a climate change expert; on the basis of these factors, evidence is rejected if it does not accord with political and ideological views with which a person identifies, consequently leading to political polarization.

In the second experiment on political polarization, Kahan tested whether politically motivated reasoning can be considered rational or irrational and whether there is an asymmetry or symmetry in the inclination of people who have different ideological views to rely on this psychological mechanism (Kahan 2013). It is noteworthy that Kahan makes a difference between Bayesian rationality, as a typical model of rationality (where prior probability regarding an assumption or a hypothesis is adequately revised in the light of new evidence), biased confirmation (where prior probability regarding an assumption or a hypothesis directly determines the acceptability of evidence) and politically motivated reasoning (where prior probability regarding an assumption or a hypothesis is determined by political identity, which directly affects acceptance or rejection of evidence) (Kahan 2016a).

Kahan makes a difference among several approaches that generate different predictions regarding the role of motivated reasoning in political polarization. The first approach which is dominant within psychology of reasoning and rationality, termed the dual process theory, makes a difference between System 1, which is intuitive, fast, simple and primarily based on emotion, and System 2 which is reflexive, slow, requires analytical thinking and cognitive processes. According to Kahan, given the priority of intuitive system 1 when explaining motivated reasoning, the dual process theory approach presupposes decisive influence of that system for explanation of political polarization.[10] The second approach stresses

10 In the previous section, we have seen that Haidt's explanation of political polarization can also be understood in a similar way, because it is based on intuitive System 1.

asymmetry regarding different ideological views in relation to political polarization, assuming that people with right-wing and conservative ideological orientation are more prone to rely on intuition, and therefore more prone to use motivated reasoning leading to political polarization. Finally, Kahan advocates a third approach based on politically motivated reasoning. Quite contrary to previous approaches, this model envisages that System 2 has a greater effect on political polarization, but also that there is a symmetry between people with different ideological views regarding an inclination to politically motivated reasoning.

The design of the experiment is such that it consists of two parts. Within the first part of the experiment, the respondents take the Cognitive Reflection Test, a standard test on the basis of which it can be ascertained to what extent the respondents rely on System 1 and on System 2 (which usually shows predominant relying on System 1). The second part of the experiment consists of respondents being given a piece of information which informs them that those who achieved good scores on the Cognitive Reflection Test usually accept (or reject, respectively) evidence regarding climate change, on the basis of which they are expected to assess the validity of the test.

Kahan reports that the results of this experiment have shown that predictions from the perspective of the model of politically motivated reasoning are more accurate than predictions of alternative approaches. Recall that the dual process theory and ideological asymmetry theory predict that intuitive reasoning typical of system 1 was the primary factor for the explanation of political polarization. Quite the contrary, Kahan's experiment shows that persons scoring better at the Cognitive Reflection Test (which is one of the indications for greater reliance on System 2) are more inclined to rely on politically motivated assessment of the validity of the test on the basis of additional piece of information regarding acceptance (or rejection) of evidence on climate change. Furthermore, Kahan reports that this can equally be noticed among people who scored better at the Cognitive Reflection Test, both among those who displayed liberal views and those who displayed conservative views. In other words, the results of Kahan's experiment show not only that reliance on System 2 to a larger extent led towards political polarization, but also that an inclination to politically motivated reasoning was symmetrical in terms of different ideological standpoints.

Relying on results of the experiment, Kahan concluded that politically motivated reasoning can be considered an adequate explanation of political polarization, because in the light of additional information which directly referred to political and ideological identity, political polarization

was generated. In addition, Kahan drew two additional conclusions that politically motivated reasoning can be considered rational and that there was a symmetry in the inclination toward politically motivated reasoning regardless of ideological orientation. The first conclusion is somewhat surprising given the previous discussion in this paper. Namely, as we have seen, some dominant psychological explanations of political polarization and the rejection of scientific knowledge emphasize significance of motivated cognition, i.e., reliance on intuition and heuristics typical of System 1. In sharp contrast, Kahan emphasizes that "far from reflecting *too little rationality*, then, politically motivated reasoning reflects *too much*" (Kahan 2016b: 4). Kahan finds evidence for this conclusion in the fact that people who rely more on System 2 also have a greater inclination to politically motivated reasoning. He explains this in the following way:

> "Given the social meanings that factual positions on these issues convey, however, failing to adopt the stance that signals who she is – *whose side she is on* – could have devastating consequences for a person's standing with others whose support is vital to her well-being, emotional and material. Under these conditions, it is a perfectly rational thing for one to attend to information in a manner that promotes beliefs that express one's identity correctly, regardless whether such beliefs are factually correct... And if one is really good at conscious, effortful information processing, then it pays to *apply* that reasoning proficiency to give information exactly this effect." (Kahan 2016b: 4).
>
> "Far from evincing irrationality, this pattern of reasoning promotes the interests of individual members of the public, who have a bigger personal stake in fitting in with important affinity groups than in forming correct perceptions of scientific evidence." (Kahan 2017: 1)

However, there is an ambivalence in Kahan's specification of rationality. In order to see the problem, recall Kahan's initial differentiation between Bayesian rationality, biased confirmation and politically motivated reasoning. One of the key insights which Kahan reaches on the basis of his experiments is that unlike Bayesian rationality which is truth convergent, biased confirmation and politically motivated reasoning are not truth convergent. What distinguishes biased confirmation from politically motivated reasoning is that in relation to politically motivated reasoning it is possible to formulate specific predictions on the basis of ideological identity, which would not be possible with regard to biased confirmation. For example, if people do not have any previous knowledge on nanotechnologies, from the perspective of biased confirmation it is difficult to have any prediction what their views would be once they have been fed the information of such kind. However, if one assumes general disinclination towards new technologies as an important characteristic of an ideological view, from the perspective of politically motivated reasoning clear predic-

tions can be made regarding people's views once they have been fed the same type of information. Regardless of this difference, Kahan thinks that both types of reasoning clearly differ from Bayesian rationality inasmuch as evidence is not approached in a rational way.

We have seen that for Kahan politically motivated reasoning can be considered as a rational way of thinking. But how can politically motivated reasoning at the same time be rational and not be rational because it deviates from Bayesian rationality? It is obvious that there is ambivalence in Kahan's specification of rationality. Given that he does not make any further clarification, this ambivalence to a great extent limits the scope of his claim that relying on politically motivated reasoning is "perfectly rational". In other words, even if it is rational for a person to rely on politically motivated reasoning in order to promote her own interests, this cannot be rational in an epistemic sense of the term, because her way of reasoning deviates from adequate consideration of evidence and revision of degrees of belief.

Kahan's second conclusion suggests that there is a symmetry in the inclination toward politically motivated reasoning. Kahan thinks that his experiment only shows that the issue must remain unresolved and open for further research (Kahan 2016b: 5–6). In this regard, he actually compares results he had arrived at on the basis of his experiment with results of other experiments. However, when his symmetry thesis is viewed outside the lab context, it is obvious that the asymmetry thesis has a much larger evidential support that political science had mustered.

We have seen in the first section that climate change denial has its origin in conservative political beliefs and strategies adopted by the Republican Party for the sake of its own political agenda, which led to an emergence of public polarization on climate change (Bayes and Druckman 2021). Lewandowsky and Oberauer point out that this does not only pertain to scientific knowledge regarding climate change: "the rejection of specific scientific evidence across a range of issues, as well as generalized distrust in science, appears to be concentrated primarily among the political right" (Lewandowsky and Oberauer 2016: 218). However, our criticism of Kahan's symmetry thesis should not be misunderstood. It does not suggest that only conservatives are inclined toward politically motivated reasoning. The experiments clearly show that anyone regardless of ideological viewpoint can be subject to the politically motivated reasoning. The criticism merely suggests that in a situation when experimental evidence does not provide sufficient reasons to decide in favour of the symmetry thesis or the asymmetry thesis, additional evidence arrived at within political science about functioning of contemporary political life

can be relevant in this regard. And this evidence adds more weight to the asymmetry thesis than to Kahan's symmetry thesis.[11]

4.

So far I examined various explanations of political polarization. In this section, I turn to the question in what way political polarization can be overcome. At first glance, the very formulation of the question suggests that political polarization is something necessarily bad. For that reason, I would like to emphasize that one of the main tenets of democratic societies is the fact of disagreement. Taking into account that disagreement may not be something necessarily bad, I will make a distinction between *epistemically positive political polarization* and *epistemically negative political polarization*. What is epistemically positive political polarization? The dominant explanations of political polarization (including those we examined in the previous sections) view this phenomenon as the one in which both sides are equally under the influence of unconscious psychological mechanisms that lead them to a rejection of evidence which is contrary to their political identity. However, one of the sides may have correct beliefs that are based on evidence and the best scientific theories. In other words, rather than concluding that in the process of political polarization both sides are necessarily wrong due to the influence of psychological mechanisms such as politically motivated reasoning, one of the sides may actually have correct beliefs in the sense that the beliefs of that side are supported by evidence and formed in a rational way. The insistence on truth and correctness of belief *because it is based on evidence* is something that may lead to belief polarization, and even to political polarization. However, in that case, we have an epistemically positive political polarization, because it preserves knowledge and truth rather than political identity of a specific group.

The main problem regarding political polarization, at least in the form in which it emerges in contemporary societies is that it goes precisely in the opposite direction – in the direction of epistemically negative political polarization. Namely, a characteristic of epistemically negative political polarization inheres in the aspiration to disseminate wrong beliefs and incite irrational response towards available evidence, for the sake of achieving specific political and economic goals. The problem with epistemically negative political polarization is precisely that it aspires to align people into insular groups who share certain attitudes and beliefs and who view

11 On this point see also: Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019: Chapter 7.

other people who do not share their attitudes and beliefs as enemies rather than citizens who simply disagree with them. Such a kind of political polarization is harmful for democracy because it disrupts the ties of democratic citizenship that bind all citizens despite their different attitudes and beliefs. It leads towards aspiring to impose beliefs characteristic of one insular group on the entire society and guide society toward authoritarian forms of rule in which opposite beliefs and views are not tolerated and are moreover suppressed and considered undesirable. Therefore, the question regarding a way out of political polarization primarily refers to this type of epistemically negative political polarization that undermines democratic society and normalizes authoritarian forms of rule and behavior.

The solutions for a way out of political polarization (understood in the sense of epistemically negative political polarization) largely depend on a series of factors which pertain to a degree of polarization, level of development of democracy and democratic institutions, accessibility of scientific knowledge etc. To be sure, interdisciplinary research by different disciplines in social sciences and humanities can offer the best route to find solutions for a way out of political polarization. In the rest of the paper, I will suggest some routes from the perspective of political philosophy. In that regard, I will make a distinction between *individual* and *institutional* solutions for political polarization.

We have seen in the previous section that a large part of explaining political polarization refers to whether people approach evidence in a rational way. I have pointed out that one of the dominant explanations that adduces politically motivated reasoning is in fact ambivalent in that regard. This problem, in my view, is related to what I have termed individual solutions for a way out of political polarization. Glüer and Wikforss point out that in Kahan's view on politically motivated reasoning, no clear distinction has been made between epistemic and practical rationality (Glüer and Wikforss 2022: 38). In short, epistemic rationality refers to rational foundation of belief, while practical rationality refers to rationality of reasons for action. Their criticism also points out that even if Kahan's explanation of rationality can be understood in terms of practical rationality, it certainly cannot be understood in terms of epistemic rationality. Glüer and Wikforss suggest that for the phenomenon of "knowledge resistance" which has emerged in contemporary societies is characteristic "an irrational response to evidence" and that "it always includes irrationality" (Glüer and Wikforss 2022: 37, 43).

Clear understanding of aspects which pertain to rationality and irrationality is very important for individual solutions to find a way out of political polarization. Namely, if it is clear that one of the main problems

leading to political polarization is that individuals approach evidence in irrational way, then solutions should be sought in the direction of boosting epistemic rationality at the individual level. An objection could immediately be made that individual solutions are overly (and even hopelessly) optimistic if they expected individuals who in irrational way approach evidence to be ready to realize and, moreover, rectify this way of approaching evidence. However, this largely depends on various types of incentives which presently largely go in favor of epistemic irrationality. But, incentives in the direction of epistemic rationality originating from formal and informal education, as well as public policy, may be significant for individual solutions. The goal of this type of education and public policy is merely to make widely available knowledge about possible ways individuals have to overcome epistemic irrationality. In any case, how this knowledge will be used depends solely on individuals themselves. That these ideas are not overly (or hopelessly) optimistic is suggested by a psychological approach that testifies about positive effects of boosting rationality (Hertwig 2017).

I turn now to institutional solutions for political polarization. I already pointed out that institutional solutions pertaining to education and public policies may contribute to individual solutions regarding political polarization. However, the main institutional solution that I have in mind is public deliberation, that is, a sort of public discussion within which citizens in conditions of freedom and equality express their reasons for the views they advocate and listen to arguments by fellow citizens. This institutional solution and individual solutions are complementary in the sense that precisely a discussion with other people and new information acquired in that way may lead to boosting epistemic rationality. In the second section, I agreed with Haidt's view that confronting a contrary opinion and an inclination to understand why other people advocate contrary attitudes was an important step for overcoming political polarization, but I have also then pointed out that institutional mechanisms were needed for that purpose. Public deliberation is such a type of institutional mechanism because it fosters communication with other people in conditions that promote tolerance and equality. However, I emphasize that the purpose of public deliberation as *an institutional solution* is precisely in the provision of permanent institutional mechanism, not a one-off solution to the problem of political polarization.

In the context of this institutional solution, an objection can be made as well that it is an overly (and even hopelessly) optimistic expectation. In order to answer that objection, I turn to Mercier and Sperber's research on the function of reasoning. Their research shows that psychological mech-

anisms which lead to irrational way of reasoning at the individual level from an evolutionary perspective can best be described as adaptations for communication and collective reasoning (Mercier and Sperber 2011, Mercier and Sperber 2012). In their view, "reasoning has evolved and persisted mainly because it makes human communication more effective and advantageous" (Mercier and Sperber 2011: 60). Mercier and Sperber go on to explain that biased confirmation and motivated reasoning have important functions that are related to collective reasoning. Biased confirmation has an important function of protecting one's own standpoint in the course of discussion with other people and motivated reasoning has a function of not accepting lightly the views put forward by others. Thanks to those mechanisms, according to Mercier and Sperber, people only through discussion with other people arrive at the best solutions, that is, realization which reasons and arguments are the most convincing. They advocate the view that the function of reasoning is primarily associated with a collective plan of communication and that therefore reasoning functions well in that context.

Even though the main aim of Mercier and Sperber's research is explanation of reasoning in the light of evolutionary theory, Mercier and Landemore connected the results of this research with democratic theory pointing out its significance for understanding public deliberation and deliberative democracy (Mercier and Landemore 2012). They complement earlier insight that individual reasoning does not function well outside communication context with the view that it would not function well in conditions of a discussion between like-minded people. The psychological mechanisms such as biased confirmation and motivated reasoning in the context of a discussion among like-minded people lead precisely to a dynamic of group polarization. For that reason, they think that reasoning, in addition to functioning well at the collective level of communication, works best in conditions of mutual disagreement. And precisely communication with other people who initially disagree is a way to arrive at the best solution or the best decision. Mercier and Landemore conclude that „*fixing individual reasoning is not the solution*"; instead, to improve reasoning, „the changes should be made at the institutional rather than the individual level" (Mercier and Landemore 2012: 254). However, although I agree that institutional changes going in the direction of public deliberation would be important for a way out of political polarization, I do not fully agree with Mercier and Landemore's conclusion that solutions should not be sought at the individual level as well. Quite the contrary, I think that individual and institutional solutions are complementary and both important for a way out of political polarization.

Some recent experiments on public deliberation which directly or indirectly pertain to a possibility of reducing political polarization also show that the proposed institutional solution is not overly optimistic. One of the most important experiments regarding deliberative democracy is *deliberative poll*. In this experiment, randomly selected representative sample of citizens had an opportunity to discuss, in two days, working in smaller groups as well as in bigger plenary sessions (within which experts for a given area also took part), certain social and political issues. Before and after these two days, they obtained an identical questionnaire which pertained to the extent of their knowledge, as well as their preferences regarding the topic of discussion. Numerous experiments with deliberative polling have shown significant improvements in terms of the level of knowledge after only two days of participating in the experiment, as well as significant changes of preferences.

One of the criticisms of deliberative democracy has been that public discussion (especially among like-minded people) may lead to group polarization (Sunstein 2002). On the basis of an analysis of ten previously conducted experiments regarding deliberative polling, Fishkin and his colleagues have reached a conclusion that public deliberation may actually lead to depolarization (Luskin, Fishkin and Hahn 2007). These conclusions have been made on the basis of deliberative polling experiments, even though neither of experiments had been specifically designed to address the issue. Unlike these previous experiments, a recently conducted deliberative poll entitled *America in One Room* aimed precisely to establish to what extent public deliberation may contribute to a reduction of political polarization (Fishkin et al. 2021). The results show that owing to public deliberation, it is possible to arrive at a significant reduction of political polarization in two respects – regarding topics on which the citizens are most polarized, and regarding affective aspect of polarization.[12] In other words, owing to public deliberation it is possible to come to a rapprochement of attitudes, but also to a reduction of negative affects between political opponents. The results of the experiment also show that these effects do not merely occur among people who are moderately polarized, but also those who are extremely polarized. Moreover, the experiment has shown that when certain topics are concerned, two-way depolarization had oc-

12 Some recent experiments show that discussion can be particularly important for reducing affective polarization (Santoro and Broockman 2022). The results of these experiments have shown that affective depolarization can primarily be achieved in a discussion of opponents regarding topics that are not the object of polarization of attitudes, but also that effects of discussion in this regard are short-term (around three months) and that they may easily disappear if the discussion relates to topics that are the object of political polarization.

curred, but also a one-way depolarization (namely, rapprochement of attitudes due to greater changes among one of the polarized sides).

Recent research conducted by Mercier and Cladière, even though it does not tackle political polarization, indirectly concerns the institutional solution we proposed in this section (Mercier and Cladière 2021). These authors proceed from the hypotheses that public discussion would contribute to better knowledge and convergence of attitudes regarding factual issues. Even though the experiment directly addressed the „wisdom of crowds" when larger groups of people are concerned, it is indirectly relevant for proposed institutional solution, given that it explores the possibility of convergence of attitudes regarding factual issues on the basis of public discussion. The results of the experiment show that only 15 minutes of public discussion has made people give much more accurate answers to questions regarding factual issues compared to their initial individual responses.

Recently, an experiment has been conducted aiming to establish to what extent citizens' discussion within a smaller deliberative body or a mini-public about the facts relevant for enactment of policies may affect larger acceptance of evidence among the broader public (Már and Gastil 2020). This experiment is interesting in the present context because it aimed to establish to what extent a report of a deliberative body would affect motivated reasoning (given existing polarization regarding the topic of GMO regulation that was the object of public deliberation) and to what extent it would contribute to better realization of facts. The results of the experiment have shown that an information regarding deliberation on the given topic has actually among broader public led to a greater degree of knowledge about factual issues, rather than to a rejection of evidence on the basis of motivated reasoning. Moreover, the experiment has shown that acceptance of evidence and better knowledge regarding factual issues occurred even among people who had been most polarized on ideological grounds. Considering that in this paper I have mostly dealt with political polarization on factual issues, the results of aforementioned experiments provide some evidential support for the expectation that public deliberation may lead to depolarization on the questions of facts.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused on rejection of evidence as one of the main characteristics of political polarization. This does not mean that I consider the role of values less important for explanation of political polarization. On the contrary, as we have had a chance to see, values may

precisely be the sources for rejection of evidence, and among the drivers of epistemic irrationality. However, I focused on political polarization over evidence for two reasons. The first reason is that polarization over facts is surprising and requires additional explanation. If disagreement among people regarding values is something that is expected, disagreement over evidence certainly is not. The second reason is that the proposed solutions for a way out of political polarization may play a role precisely in this regard. Namely, the basic expectation from the proposed individual and institutional solutions is not convergence of value-related attitudes, but a possibility that people would approach evidence in a more rational way. So, the expectation is that the way out of political polarization may begin with the first step that pertains to a reduction of polarization over evidence and factual issues.

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