



## Of two minds: The interactive effect of construal level and identity on political polarization



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Construal level and identity salience interact to predict political polarization.
- When partisan identity is salient, high level construal leads to greater polarization.
- When national identity is salient, high level construal leads to less polarization.

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### ABSTRACT

Construal level theory posits that when people are thinking abstractly (vs. concretely) they rely more on their core and consistent attitudes and values. However, past research has been mixed on whether abstract thinking causes liberals and conservatives to become more or less polarized. In the current research, we examine how identity salience moderates the effect of construal level on political polarization. Results from two studies suggest that identity salience (political vs. national) plays a key role in predicting how construal level affects attitude polarization. When people's political identity was made salient, liberals and conservatives were more polarized about political issues when thinking abstractly (vs. concretely). Conversely, when national identity was salient, liberals and conservatives were less polarized when in an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset. Broadly, this research highlights the importance identity salience has in understanding the role abstract (vs. concrete) thinking has on people's attitudes and values.

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### Introduction

Over the last two decades, research on construal level theory has uncovered myriad ways in which individuals' mindsets affect how they view, perceive, and interact with their environment. When people are thinking *abstractly*, they tend to focus on core and consistent features of the self that transcend any specific situation. Individuals thinking *concretely*, by contrast, tend to be more influenced by secondary and contextual factors (Trope & Liberman, 2000; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). The question of how construal level affects political attitudes and polarization has been the focus of much recent research, but the findings have been mixed: some work has shown that abstract thinking reduces attitude differences between liberals and conservatives, whereas other work has found the opposite to be true. The current research aims to explain this discrepancy by looking at how different concepts of the self (or different identities) moderate the relationship between abstract thinking and political attitudes.

Some past work on construal level suggests that abstraction allows people to rise above situational and social influence and act more in line with their core values and beliefs (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008; Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010; Ledgerwood, Trope, & Liberman, 2010). Ledgerwood et al. (2010a) argued that "ideological values can be considered broad principles that apply to attitude objects across situations, relate to their central and defining features, and tend to be socially shared within ongoing and important relational contexts" (p. 35). They predicted that political polarization should be greater when people are thinking abstractly (vs. concretely) because political ideology will influence attitudes and behaviors more. This hypothesis was supported: when participants were in an abstract mindset, they were less likely to be influenced by situational factors (i.e., the attitude of a potential interaction partner), and more likely to report attitudes in line with their previously reported political ideology (see Studies 3 and 4). Thus, some research is in line with the notion that liberals and conservatives show increased polarization when thinking abstractly (vs. concretely) because political ideology is a core and consistent belief system.

However, other research has shown the opposite effects: when liberals and conservatives are thinking abstractly (vs. concretely), they become more *similar* on various dimensions, including out-group

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attitudes (Luguri, Napier, & Dovidio, 2012), moral values (Napier & Luguri, in press), and political attitudes (Yang, Preston, & Hernandez, 2013). For example, Yang et al. (2013) found that although liberals and conservatives are normally polarized in their attitudes about building a mosque near Ground Zero, construal level impacted their beliefs, such that abstract (vs. concrete) thinking led conservatives and liberals to become more moderate on their stances, thereby reducing polarization.

These conflicting findings raise an important question: Does construal level influence political attitudes in any systematic way? We propose that a focus on *identity salience* can illuminate the seeming inconsistencies among these findings. That is, we propose that construal level theorists are correct to assert that abstract (vs. concrete) thinking increases people's adherence to attitudes that are central to their self, but that the self is composed of many group identities, some of which might lead to conflicting attitudes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Indeed, some recent work within the construal level literature has begun to highlight the important role that identity, particularly group identity, might play in illuminating when and how construal level will affect attitudes (Ledgerwood & Callahan, 2012; McCrea, Wieber, & Myers, 2012). For example, recent research by Ledgerwood and Callahan (2012) found that people are more likely to conform to group norms when thinking abstractly (vs. concretely). They found that students evaluating public policies (e.g., affirmative action) were more likely to be influenced by the voting behavior of other students when in an abstract, as compared to concrete, mindset. Ledgerwood and Callahan (2012) argue that while an abstract mindset allows people to rise above incidental or unimportant social influences, groups are a consistent and important influence and therefore people will be more attuned to group norms when thinking abstractly.

In a similar vein, McCrea et al. (2012) found that people report higher levels of group identification and engage more in self and group stereotyping when thinking abstractly (vs. concretely). For example, participants identified more with their respective genders and were more likely to self-stereotype themselves based on gender after they were induced to think abstractly (vs. concretely; Studies 3a and 3b). Along with the Ledgerwood and Callahan (2012) findings, this research suggests that groups have a larger influence on attitudes when people are in an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset.

Yet the question still remains: if people thinking abstractly (vs. concretely) are more likely to base their attitudes on those of their groups, which groups do they use as reference points? People integrate many different groups into their self-concepts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), and these groups can have divergent influences on attitudes. McCrea et al. (2012) offered an important insight to this question by looking at role of identity salience. They found that people induced to thinking abstractly (vs. concretely) were more likely to self-stereotype themselves based on their gender, but only when people were asked to indicate their gender *before* the stereotyping measures. This finding suggests that identity salience can play an important moderating role in construal level effects.

This new framework, which illustrates the importance of identity salience, can perhaps help explain the prior inconsistent literature on how construal level affects political polarization. People have multiple political identities, and these identities can have divergent influences on attitudes. For example, someone thinking of their identity as a Democrat might have a different view on immigration than if that same person was conceiving of their identity as an American.

Past research on the common ingroup identity model has demonstrated that subgroup identities (like political parties) tend to be divisive, whereas superordinate identities (like nationality) can reduce the perceived difference between the subgroups, and lead people to make decisions that benefit the group as a whole (Gaertner, Dovidio, Nier, Ward, & Banker, 1999; Smith & Tyler, 1996). Similarly, studies

have shown that even subliminal exposure to a national symbol (i.e., a flag) can reduce political polarization (Hassin, Ferguson, Shidlovski, & Gross, 2007). Therefore, political identity salience should increase polarization between liberals and conservatives, and national identity salience should decrease polarization, at least to the extent that people are thinking abstractly.

Considering past research, it is possible that certain identities related to political attitudes were unintentionally made salient through the manipulations and dependent variables. For example, in Yang et al.'s (2013) work, which found that abstract (vs. concrete) thinking *decreased* polarization, participants were shown pictures of the 9/11 attacks, which potentially made their American identity salient. In the Ledgerwood et al. (2010a) studies, which found abstract (vs. concrete) thinking *increased* polarization, participants were told that they would be taking about a political policy issue, potentially making their partisan identity salient.

In the current set of studies, we seek to directly test whether identity salience moderates the effect of construal level on political polarization among liberals and conservatives. To the extent that abstract (vs. concrete) thinking encourages people's adherence to their central values, but that different identities are associated with different (and sometimes divergent) sets of values, we hypothesize that construal and identity salience will have an interactive effect on political attitudes. Specifically, thinking abstractly with a focus on one's identity as a Republican (or Democrat) should increase conservative (or liberal) opinions, thereby increasing political polarization. Thinking abstractly with one's national (e.g., American) identity salient, however, should encourage attitude consistency with a broader (and more diverse) group, and thus should promote more moderate stances on political issues and reduce polarization.

## Current research

In two studies, we manipulate both construal level and identity salience and examine their interactive effects on political polarization. We predict that when people's political identity is salient, abstract (vs. concrete) thinking will lead to greater political attitude polarization; when people's national identity is made salient, by contrast, we predict that abstract (vs. concrete) thinking will be associated with reduced polarization.

In Study 1, identity salience is manipulated through priming a political (liberal or conservative) identity or a national identity. Study 2 was conducted to show the replicability of the results of Study 1, both in terms of an increased sample size, and with a specific focus on American politics. We compared American participants who were primed with their partisan (Democrat or Republican) identity or their national, American identity.

## Study 1

### Method

#### Participants

Participants ( $N = 137$ ) were recruited from a university-hosted online subject pool in exchange for a chance to win a gift certificate. Nine participants were removed from this sample because they failed to fill out the construal manipulation correctly (i.e., they left multiple or all parts of the ladder questionnaire blank, or gave one answer repeatedly), yielding a final sample of 128 participants (average age = 35.40 years,  $SD = 13.24$ , 76 female).

#### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to construal condition (abstract or concrete), in which they were asked to fill out a ladder questionnaire about good physical health. In the abstract condition, participants started at the bottom of the ladder and "moved up," generating

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