Political violence and inaccurate metaperceptions

Jeffrey Lees1

The January 6, 2021 attack on the United States Capitol, which left five dead and hundreds injured, was a stark demonstration that political violence remains a clear and present threat to democratic institutions. Perhaps because of the rarity of such events in the United States’ near past, recent scholarship on political and intergroup conflict has focused largely on topics of polarization and attitude extremism rather than political violence. It is in this social and scientific context that Mernyk et al. (1) provide timely and compelling evidence that inaccurate metaperceptions serve as a psychological driver of support for and willingness to engage in political violence, and that correcting such inaccurate metaperceptions can durably attenuate partisans’ positive attitudes toward political violence.

Mernyk et al. (1) begin by documenting inaccurate partisan metaperceptions related to political violence. Both Democrats and Republicans substantially overestimate the extent to which outpartisans support and are willing to engage in political violence. Next, they introduce a corrective intervention which informs partisans of outpartisans’ true and low levels of support for and willingness to engage in political violence. This intervention reduces partisans’ own support for and willingness to engage in political violence, and they find that this effect lasts for at least a month.

The success of their intervention provides two critical takeaways. First, attitudes about political violence can be changed and increasing levels of polarization have not cemented partisans’ tolerance for political violence. Second, these interventions provide experimental evidence that attitudes about political violence are caused in part by judgments of how much others support and are willing to engage in political violence. Put simply, if partisans (inaccurately) think other partisans are tolerant of political violence, they will themselves become more tolerant of political violence. This dynamic parallels similar findings across social domains, where (mis)perceptions of social norms and others’ attitudes can lead people to shift their own opinions closer to the (mis)perceived values (2–4).

Metaperceptions and False Polarization

Mernyk et al.’s (1) findings also echo a growing body of work on misperceptions of political polarization and how this “false polarization” contributes to actual polarization (5–8). Broadly defined, false polarization is the phenomenon where people believe politics is more polarized than it is in truth. Individuals overestimate the levels of disagreement between partisans (9–11), and perceived polarization is a stronger predictor of negative outgroup evaluations than actual polarization (7). However, while congruent with work on false polarization, considering how Mernyk et al.’s (1) findings do and do not differ from past work on false polarization can help inform a broader understanding of how misperceptions contribute to political conflict.

Mernyk et al. (1) build upon similar work on intergroup metaperceptions and in some respects their findings are directly analogous to past findings. For example, inaccurate perceptions of how much the outgroup dehumanizes one’s ingroup (metadehumanization) predicts support for breaking democratic norms (12), and correcting inaccuracies in metadehumanization can reduce reciprocal dehumanization toward the outgroup (13). Similarly, inaccurate perceptions of how the outgroup will react to collective intergroup behaviors (group metaperception) predicts polarized motive attributions, and correcting inaccurate group metaperceptions has successfully reduced polarized attributions in nine countries (14, 15). Like Mernyk et al.’s (1) findings, group metaperception interventions are more effective on those who are more inaccurate at baseline, providing further evidence for a causal relationship between inaccuracies and intergroup attitudes. Inaccuracy also persists for metaperceptions of ingroup members in addition to metaperceptions of outgroup members, although ingroup metaperceptions are less inaccurate (6).

Disentangling the Roots of Political Violence and Polarization

Despite the similarities with past findings, Mernyk et al. (1) begin to illuminate the ways in which the umbrella of false polarization may miss critical distinctions in the psychological processes driving negative political attitudes and outcomes. They find that while their corrective interventions have durable impacts on attitudes toward political violence, attitudes toward political violence are only weakly related to affective polarization, and the interventions have no observable effect on polarization levels. I would caution against interpreting this to suggest that the interventions’ effectiveness is narrow or limited. Rather, it suggests that the causal relationship between inaccurate metaperceptions and attitudes is highly domain-specific, an inference supported by a growing body of work. For example, while metadehumanization is associated with ingroup hostility and reciprocal dehumanization, metaprejudice is not (16), suggesting that (meta) dehumanization and (meta) prejudice have differing associated outcomes and

Author affiliations: *Media Forensics Hub, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634

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1 Email: jeffrey.m.lees@gmail.com.

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potentially distinct antecedents. Similarly, the group meta-
pereception interventions which have been found to reduce
polarization in nine different countries (14) have no effect
on antidemocratic attitudes (17), suggesting affective polar-
ization and antidemocratic attitudes are not as psychologically
linked as many scholars have assumed.

The evidence that intergroup metaperceptions in one
content domain are directly linked to attitudes in that
domain, but rarely tied to metaperceptions or attitudes in
other domains, buttresses a central argument made by
Lees and Cikara (6). They argue that the false polarization
hypothesis, which states that inaccurate (meta) beliefs are
contributing to negative intergroup outcomes, is no doubt
true. However, they also argue greater attention is needed
to the nature of those specific beliefs and how they are
psychologically distinct from one another. Support for
political violence is distinct from outgroup prejudice, which
is distinct from antidemocratic attitudes, which is distinct
from dehumanization, which is distinct from extreme pol-
icy positions, etcetera. Yet, lumping them under the
category of “polarization” obscures meaningful differences
that have implications both for scientific understanding
and policy prescriptions. By measuring both affective
polarization and attitudes toward political violence, Mernyk
et al. (1) convincingly demonstrate that support for and
willingness to engage in political violence can be attenu-
ated through corrective metaperception interventions
related to political violence, but that those interventions
will not move the needle on affective polarization.

A question left open by Mernyk et al. (1), and indeed by
most research on false polarization, is the source of these
inaccurate perceptions. Wilson et al. (18) suggest that polit-
ical elites, the news media, and social media all play a role
in causing political misperceptions. These factors are likely
strong drivers of inaccurate meta perceptions about politi-
cal violence. Political violence is rare, and a large majority
of voters reject the use of violence for political ends (19),
which means that most people’s experience of political vio-
ence is through the media. As such, the role of the media
in amplifying messages which may lead to inaccurate
meta perceptions is a fruitful avenue of future research.
More worryingly, if excessive coverage of political violence
by the news media is causing inaccurate meta perceptions,
then Mernyk et al.’s (1) findings suggest such coverage
may even be indirectly contributing to support for political
violence.

In the wake of the January 6, 2021 attack on the United
States Capitol, it is reassuring to see Mernyk et al. (1)
demonstrate that despite the widespread concerns of
intractable polarization and political conflict, partisans are
sensitive to the truth and will update their beliefs accord-
ingly. The real-world value of reducing support for and
willingness to engage in political violence is apparent and
immediate, and Mernyk et al.’s (1) work deftly builds upon
past work related to false polarization and generalizes it to
this timely domain in need of further scholarship.

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