

How to Make Progress in Polarized Times

A REFLECTION WORKBOOK



Modules

01	About This Workbook	03
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02	Polarization and You	04
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03	Drivers of Polarization	07
-----------	--------------------------------	----

04	Values and Polarization	09
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05	Tools for Making Progress	11
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06	Takeaways and Personal Polarization Plan	16
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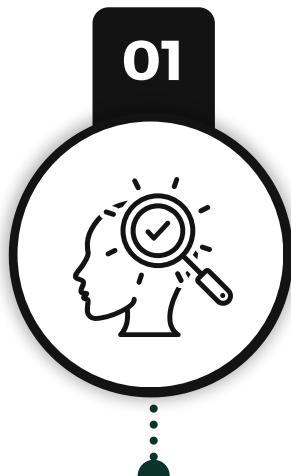
07	About the Apolitical Foundation	20
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About This Workbook

This workbook is designed to help you reflect on your role in today's polarized world and offers practical tools for making progress. It's not a deep dive into every cause of polarization, nor a checklist to "solve" it. Instead, you'll find research-backed strategies and tools to help navigate conversations and situations in polarized times and to build bridges across divides.

Though this workbook is not a summary of all depolarization methods, we humbly acknowledge the holes in geographic representation. Please reach out at info@apolitical.foundation if there are depolarizing experts or work you think we need to know about. We want to collaborate with and platform good ideas from around the world.

Workbook Goals



**UNDERSTAND
POLARIZATION AND
YOUR ROLE**



**EXPLORING VALUES AS
DRIVERS**



**TOOLS TO MAKE
PROGRESS**

Polarization and You

Polarization affects not only political systems but also our day-to-day interactions. **Affective polarization—also known as political polarization—** is the growing dislike or distrust of people simply because they hold differing political views. It's increasing worldwide, fueled by and impacting changing media, political, and societal landscapes. We all tend to think our opinions are objective facts and that people with differing political leanings are misinformed, bad thinkers, or brainwashed zombies. **The problem is, the people you disagree with think the same about you.**

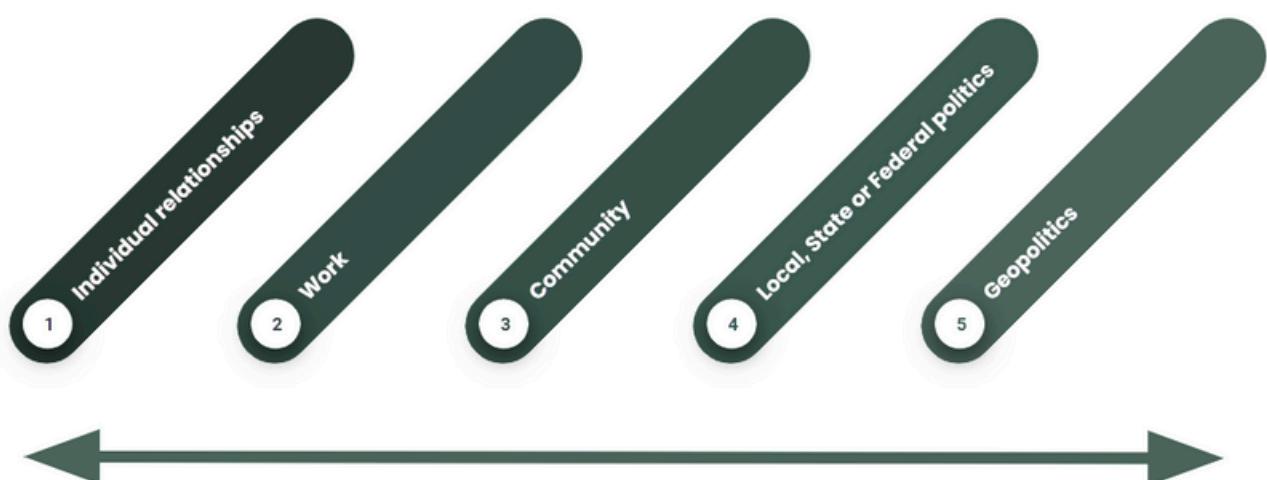
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[I]n a pluralistic society, there is nothing like the undisputable public good; there is no objective definition of equity; policies that respond to social problems cannot be meaningfully correct or false; and it makes no sense to talk about “optimal solutions”...

Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber

In “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” Policy Science, 4 (1973), 155

Where Polarization Is Experienced





Where have you recently encountered affective polarization?

Write down specific examples from the last 2 months.

The Upsides of Polarization

Polarization can create passion around important issues, motivate people to vote, and highlight significant political differences. A world completely free of polarization is probably not desirable, but we must work to do away with the negative forms and impacts.



● **Describe a time you contributed to polarization.** How does it feel to know you have contributed to polarization?

Further Reading:

- Poles Apart: Why People Turn Against Each Other, and How to Bring Them Together 
- Cross-country Trends in Affective Polarization, Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, Jesse M. Shapiro 
- Hope in Polarized Times, Apolitical Hope 

Drivers of Polarization

Driving Factors

Value Conflicts	Cognitive Biases
Social Media	Traditional Media
Strong Identities	Inequalities
Change and Uncertainty	Overly Simplified Narratives
Information Abundance	Mis and Disinformation

More about Social Media

Polarization doesn't happen in a vacuum. Several factors contribute to the growing divide. New drivers may arise in the future. We hear a lot about social media in current discussions about polarization, but it's important to remember that political divisions and dangerous identity conflicts existed long before social media, or even the printing press.



Based on the examples of polarization you discussed in Section 1, which driver— social media, cognitive biases, or values and identities etc.—do you believe had the most significant impact? Choose one specific example and explain how this factor influenced the situation. Then, share your reflections on the situation and any new insights you gained from analyzing it.

Further Reading:

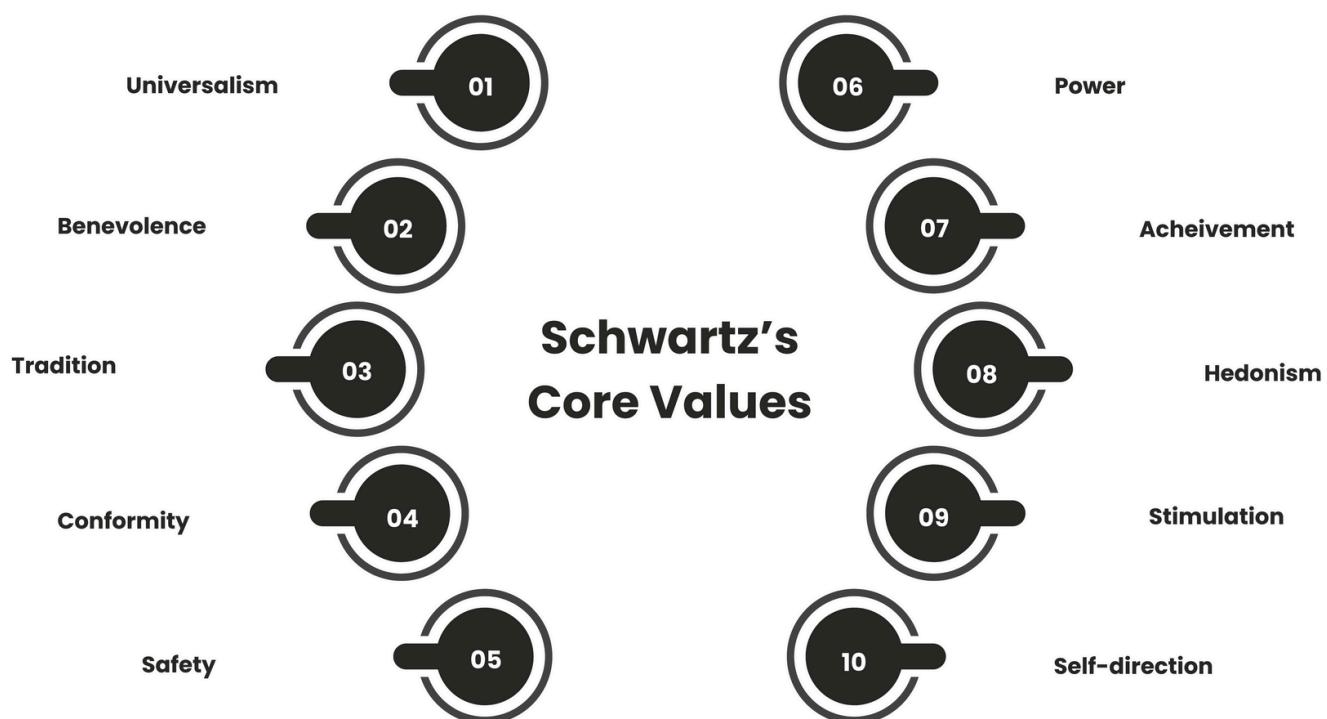
- [Politically polarized brains share an intolerance of uncertainty, Brown University](#) 
- [Is social media driving political polarization?, The Conversation](#) 
- [It's complicated: People and their democracy in Germany, France, Britain, Poland and the United States, More In Common](#) 

Values and Polarization

At the heart of our beliefs and how we act are fundamental or core human values. Understanding these different values can help explain why people become polarized. According to Professor S.H. Schwartz, there are 10 basic human values that almost all of us hold. It is our individual values hierarchies that can cause differences of opinion and drive affective polarization. When people prioritize different values, they may struggle to find common ground, making it challenging to engage in constructive dialogue.

Exercise

To explore your own fundamental values and how they influence your political and personal beliefs, complete this values test based on IDR Lebs on [Schwartz's portrait values](#). Reflect on your results below.





- Based on your test results, how might your values shape your interactions with others who hold different views? Reflect on how understanding your own values, along with those of others, can help you navigate polarized situations more effectively.

Further Reading:

- [SCARF Social Motivation Assessment](#) 
- [Values and Identities – A Policymaker's Guide, European Union](#) 
- [Understanding values: Schwartz' theory of basic values, Integration and Insights](#)

Tools for Making Progress

In polarized times, making progress and engaging in conversations can be challenging. But with the right tools, you can move from divisiveness toward understanding.

“The Way Out”

Peter Coleman presents 10 steps as a “Way Out” of polarization. The Way Out website includes summaries of each chapter and free exercises for each step. Some exercises from The Way Out that might help BEFORE you enter a difficult conversation include:

- [Why Am I Stuck? Political Polarization Self-Assessment](#)
- [Practicing Skills for the Way Out: Get Curious](#)
- [Brief Reflection on Your Theories of Conflict and Change](#)
- [Knowing Your Intentions: Debate Vs Dialogue](#)

Four Levels of Listening

Often we are listening, but on a shallow level. Otto Scharmer's Four Levels of Listening describe “generative listening” as the deepest form.

A generative listener listens “for the highest future possibility to show up while holding a space for something new to be born”.

Watch: [Scharmer describes the levels of listening.](#)



Other Listening Tools

- Juliana Tafur's Listening Courageously
- Kate Isaac and Kara Penn's The Listening Challenge
- Mónica Guzmán on "How Curiosity Will Save Us"

Again think about the polarized situation you reflected upon in section 1 and 2. How did you listen? On which of Scharmer's four levels were you listening? What would your part in the situation have looked like if you were listening from level 4, i.e., generative listening?

Moral Reframing

One effective strategy is to reframe your arguments to align with the values of the other person. Instead of focusing on what you think matters, try to connect your perspective to their values. In politics, moral reframing refers to advocating for a political stance that a group typically wouldn't support, by presenting it in terms of the values the group strongly identifies with. Importantly, it is not changing the substance of the message, but changing how it is communicated. This approach is effective because it aligns the issue with the audience's deeply rooted moral beliefs, making the position more relevant and convincing to them.

Watch: [This TED video about moral reframing with Stanford Professor Robb Willer.](#)



Reflect on a time you changed your mind about something important. How did this shift relate to your values?



Caution! If you want to come to a solution in a highly charged conflict situation, appealing just to different values can be problematic and counterproductive.

Appeal to common identities, common values and common interests.

Further Reading:

- The [U-School](#)'s free tools on working and relating with others for transformation. Most Content on this platform is offered under a Creative Commons licence. 
- ["You Can't Say That": How to Argue Better](#), [The Guardian](#) 
- [Peter Coleman's "The Way Out" resources](#) 
- [How to Make An Argument That's Actually Persuasive](#), [Time](#) 

Takeaways on Polarization and Personal Progress Plan

As you finish this workbook, here are the key points to remember and put into practice:

1. **Start with Self-Reflection.** Before engaging in difficult conversations, think about your role in polarization. How do your values and actions influence the divide? Understanding this is the first step to improving dialogue.
2. **Social Media Isn't the Cause.** Social media amplifies division, and is rightfully discussed in the public sphere. But polarization existed long before. The roots run deep down to our core values. It's important to focus on both societal and personal solutions.
3. **How you listen is critical.** Listen from outside of yourself and for the places from which new understandings, ideas, etc. can emerge.
4. **Focus on Shared Values When Communicating.** Conversations are more productive when you focus on the values you share, rather than trying to win an argument. This builds trust and can open people up to your point of view.

Personal Progress Plan

Self-reflection and productive communications are muscles that need to be trained and maintained.



Which situations in your life need these skills? Think about family, work, or community conversations where polarization is an issue.



What actions will you take in the next week, month and year to make progress in polarized contexts in your life? Outline specific steps like generative listening or reframing arguments based on shared values.



What will you keep learning? Write down topics you want to explore more or resources to keep improving your skills. Check out the [Polarization Detox Challenge](#) as a potential ongoing learning experience.

About the Better Politics Foundation

The Better Politics Foundation exists to renew leadership, reimagine politics, and rebuild trust in democracy. It starts from the belief that change begins with people, not systems, and works globally to equip courageous political leaders with the tools, evidence, and ideas to modernize politics for the 21st century. Its work is strictly non-partisan and focused on strengthening democracy through better leadership, not partisan campaigning.

Our work falls into 3 programmatic areas:

1. **Talent: Political Leadership Ecosystem**

- Developing ethical, effective, and climate-aligned leaders through the Political Leadership Accelerator, Better Politics Fund, and global network—strengthening democracy's leadership pipeline worldwide.

2. **Transformation: System and Institutional Reform**

- Partnering with research and policy organizations to make political systems more inclusive, effective, and future-ready through evidence-based innovation.

3. **Storytelling: Bridging the Gap and Rebuilding Trust**

- Redefining political norms and narratives by showcasing ethical, innovative leadership through initiatives like the Politicians' Hall of Fame and the Better Politics Index.

How You Can Engage With Us

- Explore what we do, and our reports and toolkits via our [webpage](#).
- Partner with us! We love meeting likeminded people working to update political leadership. Reach out if you want to collaborate on new projects or workshops.
- Follow us on [LinkedIn](#) or [Instagram](#).

