



Brexit, Trump, and the polarizing effect of disillusionment

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Supplementary Materials

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Supplementary Analyses

Study 1

Anger. Anger was higher among those who supported ‘remain’ ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.48$) versus those who did not ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.58$), $F(1, 106) = 123.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .537$. In additional mediation analysis, we tested if anger mediated the effect of referendum support on political views. We found no significant indirect effect through anger, $ab = -.197$, $SE = .225$, 95% CI $[-.228, .660]$, and the indirect effect of referendum support on political ideologies through disillusionment remained significant after controlling for anger, $ab = -.297$, $SE = .154$ 95% CI $[-.676, -.069]$, indicating that disillusionment, rather than anger, is a plausible mediator.

Meaning. Sense of meaning in life was lower among those who supported ‘remain’ ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.35$) versus those who did not ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.46$), $F(1, 106) = 3.62$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .033$. Despite not reaching the convention significance level, the finding is consistent with the prediction that disillusioning events provide a threat to one’s meaning system.

Study 2

Anger. We tested the indirect effect of anger across time between Clinton and Trump voters, by substituting changes in disillusionment for changes in anger in the model described in the main text. Changes in anger did not significantly predict more liberal views at T2, $p = .329$. The indirect effect of vote on T2 political stance through changes in anger was non-significant, $B = -.013$, $SE = .013$, 95% CI $[-.040, .013]$. A third model tested mediating effect of changes in disillusionment, while including changes in anger as an additional predictor variable. The indirect effect of vote on T2 political stance (controlling for T1) through changes in disillusionment remained significant after controlling for changes in anger, $B = -.051$, $SE = .026$, 95% CI $[-.109, -.005]$.

Meaning. A mixed-ANOVA with time as a within-subjects variable and vote as between subjects revealed there was a statistically significant vote \times time interaction on sense of meaning in life, $F(1, 235) = 11.43, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .046$. Specifically, Clinton voters reported lower meaning in life after ($M = 4.52, SD = 1.83$) versus before ($M = 4.69, SD = 1.79$) the election, $F(1, 235) = 6.73, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .03$; Trump voters reported higher meaning in life after ($M = 5.38, SD = 1.61$) compared to before ($M = 5.24, SD = 1.53$), $F(1, 235) = 4.78, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .02$. These results are consistent with the general notion that disillusioning experiences affect people's sense of meaning in life.

Supplementary Studies

We conducted a package of three supplementary studies to achieve four different aims. First, we assessed the effectiveness of our disillusionment manipulation (Study A). Secondly, we tested if disillusionment is casually related to political polarization (Studies A & C). Thirdly, we tested if the disillusionment effects found in Studies 1 and 2 were influenced by political ideology (Study C). Finally, we aimed to verify the generalisation of disillusionment effects by using alternative indicators of polarization (Studies A, B, & C). Taken together, these supplementary studies were designed to substantiate the relationship of disillusionment and political polarisation. Political polarization should be reflected in the extremity of views and also in political activism intentions. Importantly, political polarization is reflective of a strengthening of political attitudes and convictions (e.g., Howe & Krosnick, 2017; Vogel & Wänke, 2016), which our supplementary studies tested.

We argue that political ideologies help reaffirm a sense of meaning among disillusioned individuals, and that this will be reflected in increased political conviction and ultimately activism. When people are more convinced of their political views they are more likely to act upon them (Gamson, 1992; Klandermans, 1996).

First, we conducted two supplementary studies to test the theoretical assumptions that link disillusionment to political activism. In Study A, we tested the assumption that a disillusioning experience strengthens general political convictions. Study B was designed to verify that increased willingness to engage in political activism and the extremity of political views are both reflections of stronger political convictions. Finally, with Study C we conducted a larger experiment to test if the effects of disillusionment induced polarization lead to increased political activism intentions and to assess if this effect was independent of political ideology.

Study A: Political Conviction

We conducted Study A to test whether even temporary disillusionment increases the strengthening of political attitudes, reflected in political convictions, which is a basis for attitude extremity. Participants ($N = 89$) were randomly assigned to either disillusioning or control conditions. In both conditions, participants took part in a writing task. The disillusionment induction was based upon a similar nostalgia induction (e.g., Van Tilburg, Igou, & Sedikides, 2013; Van Tilburg, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2015). Participants in the disillusionment condition wrote about a disillusioning issue that affects the world; we instructed them: “Please think of a disillusioning issue that affects the world we live in. Specifically, try to think of a worldwide issue that makes you feel most disillusioned. Bring this disillusioning experience to mind. Immerse yourself in the disillusioning worldwide issue. How does it make you feel?” We asked participants to consider a worldwide issue to assure they would list issues with broad ranging implications as opposed to personal issues. After listing keywords that describe the disillusioning topic they described in detail how this topic made them feel and why it was disillusioning. Participants in control condition listed keywords and then described an ordinary event instead: “Please bring to mind an ordinary

event in your life. Bring this ordinary experience to mind. Immerse yourself in the ordinary experience. How does it make you feel?”

Following this induction, disillusionment was assessed with the same three items used in Studies 1, 2 and 3 of the main paper. These three items formed a disillusionment index ($\alpha = .85$). Finally, participant's political conviction was measured with one item “Please rate to what extent you are convinced that your political views are correct” with a scale from 1 (*Not at all convinced*) to 7 (*Strongly convinced*).

The results revealed that the disillusionment induction was successful. Those in the disillusionment group reported significantly higher levels of disillusionment ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.27$), compared to those in the control group ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.51$), $F(1, 87) = 85.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .49$. Furthermore, this induction led to stronger political convictions, with those in the disillusioned group reporting significantly higher conviction scores ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.13$) compared to those in the control group ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.14$), $F(1, 87) = 7.32$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. These results confirm that disillusionment results in stronger political attitudes, reflected in increased political convictions.

Study B: Polarizations in Political Attitudes and Behavior

Study B tested if political convictions were associated with polarizations in political views and behavior. One hundred participants completed a series of question aimed at assessing their political conviction, political views and political activism intentions. Conviction was assessed in a way identical to Study A. Political activism intentions were measured using the 35-item Activism Orientation Scale (AOS; $\alpha = .96$; Corning & Myers, 2003). Finally, political views were measured as in Study 2's 5-item ($\alpha = .88$) measure with 1 representing the most liberal response and 7 represented the most conservative response. In order to measure extremity of views while controlling for the direction of responses we computed the absolute difference of each score from the midpoint (ranging from 0 to 3).

As expected, political conviction was associated with two indicators of political polarization, political activism ($r = .56, p < .001$) and the extremity of political attitudes ($r = .30, p = .003$). In addition, the two indicators of polarization were significantly correlated ($r = .37, p < .001$).

Study C: Disillusionment-Induced Political Activism

We recruited participants online using MTurk ($N = 212$) and corrected for the overrepresentation of liberal participants in online samples by recruiting 70 participants of our target sample using a filter to ensure that only those who identified as conservatives could take part. Of the total sample, 116 identified as liberal and 96 identified as conservative. Three participants (2 liberal, 1 conservative) were removed from this sample for not adhering to the conditions of the study.¹

In this experiment, participants were randomly assigned to either disillusionment or a control condition (see Study A). Again, disillusionment was assessed with 3 items: I am feeling disillusioned now, I am feeling disillusioned today, I am feeling disillusioned about politics (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .88$). We measured participants' sense of meaning with five items (e.g., "The issue I wrote about gives me a sense of meaning" $\alpha = .95$). We assessed participant's political activism intentions using the Activism Orientation Scale (AOS; $\alpha = .97$; Corning & Myers, 2003).

Disillusionment was higher among those in the disillusionment condition ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.61$) compared to those in the control condition ($M = 2.54, SD = 1.32$), $F(1, 207) = 123.12, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .37$. Furthermore, we found that participants in the disillusioned condition reported significantly lower sense of meaning ($M = 3.33, SD = 1.72$), compared to those in the control condition ($M = 4.75, SD = 1.75$), $F(1, 207) = 34.63, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$.

¹ Two participants had identical ID's and another participant did not follow instructions of the disillusionment induction and answered 35 consecutive questions with the same response.

Consistent with the notion that disillusioned people become more committed to their political ideologies, we found that significantly stronger political activism intentions among those in the disillusioned group ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.48$) compared to those in the control group ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.18$), $F(1, 206) = 5.29$, $p = .022$, $\eta_p^2 = .025$. In the current study, both liberals and conservatives were included in the disillusionment condition. Importantly, the condition x political ideology interaction was non-significant $F(1, 206) = 0.003$, $p = .960$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$, thus indicating the effect of disillusionment on political activism intentions is unrelated to specific political ideologies.

General Discussion

Overall, the results of three separate empirical investigations support the notion of Studies 1-3 in the manuscript that disillusionment leads to political polarisation. The goal was to examine political extremity and political activism and their relationship to political convictions. We assumed that disillusionment would be associated with all three variables, indicating a strengthening of general political attitudes when people feel disillusioned.

In Study A, we found that disillusionment lead to stronger political convictions. Study B demonstrated that the extremity of political views and political activism intentions, reflect stronger political convictions. Finally, in Study C, a larger experiment demonstrated that disillusionment reduced sense of meaning and increased political activism intentions among both liberal and conservative participants.

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