

PRESS RELEASE

Trier, 23. Juni 2025

**From Enemy to Fellow Human Beings**

A German-Israeli research team develops a psychological approach against social division and shows how political factions can come closer together.

A recent psychological study by the University of Trier and the Open University of Israel demonstrates how increasing affective polarization, especially in the USA, can be mitigated. The key: morally positive portrayals of the political opponent — even if they are fictional. Media and politics could strategically use this lever to promote social cohesion.

"Left vs. right, conservative vs. liberal, Democrats vs. Republicans — political enemies are ubiquitous and divide entire societies," says Prof. Eva Walther from Trier University. Together with the Israeli Psychology researcher Prof. Tal Moran, she tested a model from reconciliation research that has mainly been applied after conflicts, such as in societies emerging from civil wars. "We have transferred this concept to a current social conflict for the first time."

**Moral characteristics change perception**

In a series of experiments in the U.S. context, participants who identified themselves as Republicans or Democrats were presented with images and short texts. The subjects were shown members of the respective other party — sometimes associated with morally positive information ("donated a kidney to a colleague"), and sometimes with neutral statements ("ordered favorite food from a Chinese restaurant"). The result: The positive portrayal of the political opposite led to significantly higher sympathy — even over a longer period.

"We were surprised ourselves at how strong the effect was," says Walther. The morally tinted information measurably influenced the evaluation of the depicted individuals — both in direct surveys and in tests with short reaction times.

**Responsibility of media and politics**

According to the researchers media and parties now have the responsibility to reconsider their communication patterns. "To politically reconcile after heated election battles, for instance, politicians could deliberately present their political opponents in a morally positive light," explains Walther.

An example from practice: When a German chancellor publicly states that his political opponent, despite all substantive differences, "only wants the best for our country," it can contribute to reconciliation — regardless of political disagreements.

The study is part of a growing body of scientific work searching for constructive approaches to reduce political polarization. Its particular value lies in its practical applicability to current social tensions — even outside the USA.

“We plan to investigate further whether our approach can also effectively reduce affective polarization in Israel. Furthermore, additional research is needed to investigate how the findings from our current study can be translated into practical interventions applicable in real-world settings beyond the laboratory”, adds Prof. Tal Moran.

The paper: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/19485506251343667>