



## Polarization in Modern Political Discourse

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### Abstract

This journal examines how contemporary political discourse relies on fear mongering tactics that intensify polarization and distort public understanding. Drawing on Aristotelian rhetoric and affect theory, it argues that emotional appeals are not inherently irrational but constitute a necessary component of moral judgment. Modern debate culture falls victim to the strategic hierarchy of emotions, as fear expressed by dominant groups is legitimized as rational, while moral anger expressed by marginalized groups is dismissed as irrational. This asymmetry sustains polarization by disguising power as reason. Through analysis of right wing rhetorical strategies, including moral panic framing and scapegoating, and the left's overreliance on logos based rebuttals, this paper shows how both sides contribute to a degraded communicative environment. The essay contends that fostering good faith, emotionally literate political dialogue is essential for countering extremist narratives, restoring democratic trust, and advancing constructive solutions across ideological divides.

*Keywords: Polarization, Logos, Pathos, Ethos, Polarization, Affective Politics, Political Rhetoric, Moral Framing, Discursive Legitimacy, Democratic Communication.*

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### Introduction

Persuasive arguments do not rest solely on the recitation of facts but require engagement with both moral conviction and human emotion. As Aristotle argued, appeals to pathos must be tempered by reason, but the capacity to evoke emotional responses remains an indispensable component of effective rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> However, in modern "debate culture," emotional reactions from individuals disadvantaged by existing power structures are portrayed as irrational and discrediting the substance of their arguments.<sup>2</sup> This pressures those arguing against oppressive structures to avoid appeals to pathos that make viewers tune into the intuitive inhumanity of modern human rights struggles, and instead rely solely on facts. However, strictly logos responses leave out the ethical clarity that pathos provides, and risk normalizing and legitimizing extremist views such as eugenics that hold objective immorality.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (WR Roberts tr, Dover Publications 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford University Press)



### **Polarization**

Modern debate culture has dehumanized politics and reduced genuine human struggles, such racial inequality or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, into mere opportunities for 'political gotcha moments.' These debate tactics are rooted in shows of power and intimidation of opponents, based on age, gender, or authority, rather than good faith intellectual engagement. Rather than fostering understanding, these debate styles divide people based on said identities, instituting us vs them narratives. This tactic is present on both sides of the political spectrum as fear based rhetoric gains traction easier than reasoned discussion. However many of these debate styles reject intuitive pathos, asserting that individual lives or fundamental rights are factually not worth the risk or cost, and weaponize emotional backlash to said claims. This neglects constructive dialogue that could lead to mutual understanding, and instead reinforces an “us vs. them” narrative that upholds existing power structures and deepens polarization on both sides of the political spectrum.

### **Right Wing Debate Tactics**

A common example on the right is conservative media personalities engaging in confrontational debates with young college students, relying on Ethos intimidation tactics to incite anxiety in their opponents through their authority, rather than engaging in reasoned discussion. Such debates are fuelled by the assumption of bad faith on both sides and are orchestrated to create click bait moments where one side is morally corrupt and the other is objectively correct. These dynamics align with Zizi Papacharissi's research on “affective publics,” where emotional spectacle replaces substantive democratic discourse.<sup>2</sup> As this rhetoric becomes mainstream, it reinforces the notion that the sole function of political debates is to win, rather than to learn, educate, or come to any mutual understanding. Complex issues such as wealth and racial inequalities are reduced to battles between right and wrong, erasing the complexity of moral nuance and common understanding between two sides of political discourse.

This becomes particularly dangerous when the classification of right or wrong dictates the legitimacy of an emotional response within a debate. As this tactic becomes more mainstream, its use of ethos becomes more effective, reinforcing the notion that expressions of fear or rage from a small cohort of powerful individuals are valid or “good,” while outbursts from those whose humanity is being devalued within the

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<sup>3</sup> Martha C Nussbaum, 'Review of Upheavals of Thought' (2003) 31 Journal of Religious Ethics 275.



discussions are dismissed as irrational or “bad,” and furthering the reason they are to blame for their own discrimination. These “bad” outbursts are used to further dehumanize marginalized communities and render them not only non-credible, but inherently dangerous.

In arguments on the right, the same groups that are portrayed as incompetent are paradoxically held responsible both for fear mongering narratives and the feelings of instability that arise from economic volatility. As wealth disparities rise, many feel a loss of control and seek someone to blame. This emotion is easy to manipulate through rhetoric offering the illusion that targeting a designated “bad” group could resolve systemic issues. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that emotions such as fear are forms of moral judgment that fuel democratic reasoning and progression.<sup>3</sup> Many arguments such as harsh job markets or crime being the fault of immigrants play on this emotion of fear. It offers a solution that is easier to digest than complex liberal arguments of changing the current system and offers a direct target to foster their anger towards. Historically, economic crises have been exploited to direct such anxieties toward marginalized communities, preventing the working class from uniting, and weaponizing their emotions against their best interests. To redirect public frustration away from the systems that produce economic or societal insecurity, strategically crafted rhetoric channels these anxieties toward marginalized communities, portraying them as threats rather than fellow victims of the same conditions. This dynamic

reinforces the perception that existing power structures are immutable and just, fostering the notion that the lives and intellect of those in power are inherently superior to those who are not, and that attempts to alter the status quo constitute the true injustice. Du Bois described this as the “psychological wage,” where emotional manipulation divides workers and protects elite power.<sup>4</sup> Rhetoric functions as a catalyst that transforms diffuse, systemic fear into targeted hostility, shaping who is perceived as dangerous or socially costly.

### **Left Wing Debate Tactics**

While right wing rhetorical strategies often weaponize fear, the left faces a parallel challenge in its reliance on logical appeals. The left often argues against ideologies such as immigration correlating to crime and instability with appeals to logos. A common example is arguing the fact that undocumented immigrants statistically commit less crime than citizens and contribute to the GDP without reaping

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<sup>4</sup> William E B Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (Harcourt Brace 1935).

<sup>5</sup> George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (Chelsea Green Publishing 2004).



taxation benefits. However, this tactic is often ineffective because although it logically debunks the claim, it does not negate the fears that arise from economic crises. George Lakoff's research shows that facts rarely shift deeply held beliefs because political persuasion relies on moral frames and emotional metaphors, not data alone.<sup>5</sup> In order to have effective conversation, the left must understand the pathos that the right have been manipulated with, before presenting factual solutions such as lower income taxes on middle class salaries, and explain how this is a more feasible solution to their fears than blaming an "outgroup."

The left, however, is not immune to the pitfalls of polarization and often struggles to engage in conversations that challenge a rigidly politically correct worldview. This pursuit of ideological perfectionism can foster a sense of intellectual elitism that alienates the average consumer of mainstream media. As a result, left leaning arguments, while often grounded in complexity and nuance, can lack the immediate appeal to pathos that characterizes much of right-wing rhetoric, making them harder to digest for audiences with limited educational backgrounds. While basic education teaches that racism and gender inequality are wrong, it rarely provides critical information to understanding why, leaving many without the tools to fully grasp systemic injustices. Rather than approaching this as a gap in education, the left too often treats such misunderstandings as evidence of moral failure. This isolates liberal media and gives fuel to right wing attacks on intellectualism. Fractious debates within progressive circles themselves also tend to attack their own for not "really" caring about or fully grasping the depth of systemic issues. These inner circle arguments attack each other's character, accusing each other of being preformative, while isolating real humanitarian struggles shows moral purity between political figures. This weakens pressure from collective campaigns that are the driving force for effective systemic change and makes joining these movements unattractive.

While it is difficult to construct evidence dense arguments that appeal to the average viewer, the New York City mayor elect, Zohran Mamdani, offers a compelling model for how the left can engage in more

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<sup>6</sup> American Kahani, 'The Making of a Mayor: How Mamdani Read New York City Like a Chessboard and Checkmated Its Political Establishment' (2025)

<https://americankahani.com/perspectives/the-making-of-a-mayorhow-mamdani-read-new-york-city-like-a-chessboard-and-checkmated-its-political-establishment/>.

<sup>7</sup> The Guardian, 'New York Election Trends: Michael Lange and Zohran Mamdani' (5 November 2025)

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/nov/05/new-york-election-trends-michael-lange-zohranmamdani>.



constructive political discourse. Mamdani's outreach strategy of "meeting New Yorkers where they are" was instrumental in stitching together "an unprecedented coalition" across different neighbourhoods and demographics.<sup>6</sup> His approach combines appeals to pathos, particularly by acknowledging the emotional toll of economic instability in New York City, with clearly articulated, evidence-based policy solutions rooted in logos. He particularly uses this balance when challenged by individuals who attempt to use appeals to Ethos to degrade his Muslim background, and he responds with evidence and undying commitment to the working class, dismantling their attempts to degrade his character. This balance has allowed him to gain traction across the political spectrum, attracting support from individuals not necessarily aligned with either party, but united in their desire for positive change for the working class. Analysts described his campaign as creating "a new left of centre coalition" and as attracting "Trump voters for Mamdani," defying conventional partisan expectations.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

The problem is not that politics has become too emotional, but rather that emotion has been unevenly legitimized. Democratic renewal depends not on suppressing feelings, but on democratizing whose feelings count. It is undeniably difficult to engage with people whose political ideologies rest on the assumption that certain groups are inherently inferior. Yet recognizing that polarizing arguments function by triggering emotional reactions to cast opponents as irrational enables us to dismantle them with factual clarity and principled moral reasoning.

Continuing to challenge extremist claims is essential to prevent them from becoming normalized, deepening the divide of polarization, and to bring political discussions back to a place where we can have common understanding and constructive solutions. Ultimately, those equipped to engage with such ideologies can help expose their superficiality and remove reductive, black and white talking points from political discourse. Rebuilding trust in democratic dialogue requires recognizing that political disagreement does not erase shared human concerns. While there are outliers, most people across the political spectrum share common aims including safety, opportunity, economic stability, and personal autonomy. Recognizing these shared goals is the first step toward rebuilding a political culture where disagreement does not automatically become hostility. Modern politics must move beyond its current cycle of polarization by encouraging reasoned, good faith discussion that empowers ordinary people rather than dividing them. Only through such dialogue can we strip away reductive, black and white narratives and create space for collective and constructive solutions.



### Biography

Josephina Trebing (2002, she/her) is an American law student at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam specializing in International Technology Law. Her research focuses on the regulation and engineering of sustainable technologies, and their equitable integration into society. She also has a strong passion for journalism on human rights and International politics.

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