



Listening & Learning in a Polarized World: Challenge Statement

Models and Measurements for Mapping Polarization Globally (M3PG)

Goal

Polarization is a critical obstacle to human flourishing. Templeton World Charity Foundation's [Listening and Learning in a Polarized World](#) (LLPW) priority will support research for new scientific discoveries that can help humans flourish in a world confronted with increasing polarization. The goal of this first LLPW [Request for Proposals](#) is to understand the underlying mechanisms of polarization and depolarization, with clear and measurable indicators of these mechanisms.

The outcome of this research is expected to advance the knowledge base for researchers seeking to measure and map polarization between and within societies and cultures. Ultimately, the aim is to discover culturally relevant polarization preventative and mitigating innovations.

Opportunity

Sir John Templeton, founder of Templeton World Charity Foundation, believed that "the free and friendly competition of ideas" enables the truth to "more easily emerge." This is critical for societal progress because "humans flourish best in a system of life that stimulates novelty, innovativeness, and individuality and that rewards new approaches, new concepts, new inventions, and new and better ways of thinking about life and its ultimate ends and concerns." While diversity of ideas, opinions, beliefs, and interests of a group or society is usually a healthy driver of advancement, extreme polarization often restricts free and friendly competition of ideas and can therefore be a powerful barrier to achieving societal progress and human flourishing.

The term polarization is used in a variety of contexts with different meanings. A base working definition of polarization is a state in which the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society no longer range along a continuum but become concentrated at opposing extremes.

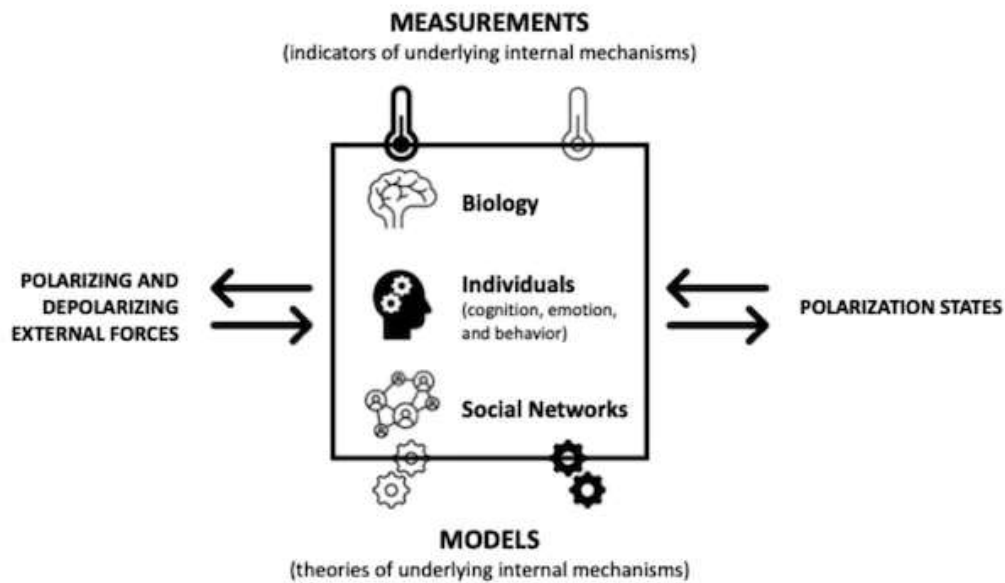
This RFP is an opportunity to assess the research to-date and to advance models and measurements of the underlying mechanisms of polarization in order to make progress toward the prevention and mitigation of polarization. The essential question to answer is: what are the internal underlying mechanisms of individuals, and their biology and social networks, leading to states of polarization (or depolarization) under the influence of external sociocultural forces? And, what are the measures to assess whether these mechanisms are in play?

Roadblocks

- Polarization research is largely siloed into different disciplines, often disconnecting theory and measurement. Research literature on conceptual frameworks and experimental findings are often isolated, hampering shared learning.
- Research and practice are not integrated and often do not inform each other.
- The term polarization is used in a variety of contexts with different meanings, often without a common understanding of the definition and kind of polarization studied.
- Research in some global regions is meager, partially due to lack of research capacity and funding. This has resulted in a current research base that is focused on Western cultures and dominated by Western perspectives.

The Challenge

The challenge is to generate new and improved theoretical models and measurements of the underlying mechanisms of polarization. Models and measurements will be designed and tested to be applicable to cross-cultural comparisons of polarization.



Definitions and examples for each element of this diagram can be found below in the Definitions and Examples section of this document.

Successful proposals will have several essential components:

MODELS (theories of underlying internal mechanisms)

Successful proposals will generate, modify, validate, or falsify models (theoretical representations of the mechanisms of polarization) which provide insights into detailed underlying internal mechanisms of polarization and will illuminate key root causes.

- Mechanisms are internal to the system and may be defined at a variety of levels, including social networks, individual psychological factors (cognitive, affective, or behavioral), or underlying biology.
- Mechanisms can be protective or aggravating (internal or social) factors for the polarizing or depolarizing effects of external sociocultural forces.
- Contextual variables may come into play (e.g. topic, group composition, rules of interaction).
- Part of the challenge may be the need to devise appropriate methods and platforms for evaluating models.

MEASUREMENTS (indicators of underlying internal mechanisms)

Successful proposals will provide specific measurements which can be used to experimentally probe the mechanisms.

- These measurements should not only provide indicators of the existence of these mechanisms at play (similar to disease biomarkers), but may also allow for probing of the strength of the effect.
- Each proposal should have at least one quantifiable measurement, but can include qualitative research and mixed-methods to help understand each measurement.

POLARIZING AND DEPOLARIZING EXTERNAL FORCES

While polarizing and depolarizing external forces may be integral to the model, with a systems perspective these forces can be seen as the inputs or feedback loops, that the internal mechanisms may transform into the output of states of polarization.

CROSS-CULTURAL

Polarization is a concept of global significance but has mostly been studied in a Western context. We are particularly interested in work capable of advancing our ability to differentiate between the universal and the particular cultural and individual components of the human experience of polarization. While the work supported by this grant is not expected to comprehensively map the indicators across different countries or cultures, funded research should be tested in two or more cultural contexts (within or between societies) and carefully consider how measurements selected are best utilized for cross-cultural studies and mapping of polarization.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY

Successful proposals will bring multidisciplinary expertise to the work required to achieve robust, integrative models and measurements applicable to cross-cultural mapping. In addition to the requisite theoretical and experimental competency, expertise relevant to cross-cultural studies may require advisors or collaborators from other disciplines.

Proposal Eligibility Checklist

- Does the proposal include a literature review that situates the proposal in relation to relevant conceptual and empirical work?
- Does the proposal seek to generate, modify, validate, or falsify one of more theoretical models of polarization through empirical work in two or more cultural contexts?
- Does the theoretical model focus on mechanisms of polarization at one (or more) of the following three levels: biology (neuroscience), individual (cognitive, affective, or behavioral), or social networks?
- Does the proposal seek to identify, develop, and/or rigorously evaluate measures of the proposed mechanisms at play?
- Does the proposal seek to identify universal and culturally specific mechanisms of polarization?
- Does the proposal provide a working definition and scope of polarization for the model and measurements? Clarity is required to understand whether models and measurements are specific to the type of polarization of interest or applicable to polarization generally.

Requirements

Proposed projects are required to:

1. Utilize open research practices as described in the application guidelines, including the submission of a detailed preregistration.
2. Agree to participate in a collaborative research network that engages cross-disciplinary discussions, with initiative grantees forming the core of the learning community.

Preferences

While our focus is on research, research informed by practice is also encouraged. This may include building research questions informed by practitioners or partnering with practitioners for measurement development or validation. This may help to ensure that projects will contribute to the knowledge base for research on the fundamental understanding of polarization informing prevention and mitigation in a global context.

Researchers from institutions around the world and those with global expertise are invited to apply. Preference will be given to proposals that emphasize the majority world and do not focus exclusively on high income countries.

Not of Interest

- Work that exclusively looks at polarizing behavior without a strong integration of theory and measurement is not of interest.
- Proposals may focus on a specific polarization issue, but the primary research objective needs to be targeted to achieve an integrated understanding of models and measurement. Work with the primary lens focused on a particular polarization issue or on cultural differences in polarization, without a fundamental understanding of models, is not of interest.
- The primary focus of proposals should not be on the development of innovations or creating resources and platforms to spread awareness of innovations, although it may be a secondary goal.
- Proposals should not explicitly aim to promote one side of a polarized topic.

Definitions and Examples

Lists of examples below are meant to be illustrative and are not comprehensive. Proposals may focus on forces, models, measurements, and states of polarization not included in the lists.

POLARIZING AND DEPOLARIZING EXTERNAL FORCES

Sociocultural inputs, or feedback loops, that polarization mechanisms may transform into the output of states of polarization.

- Communication of information (including values, opinions, perspectives, moral and emotive appeals, social signals, misinformation, and disinformation)
- Group dynamics (including affect, in-group vs. out-group, and conversation dynamics)
- Media (including mass media, social media algorithms, and propaganda)
- Cultural context
- Extremism, violence, peacemaking, and mediation
- Collective wisdom, moral narratives, and public discourse
- Governance (including freedom and protection)

MODELS (Theories of Underlying Internal Mechanisms of Polarization and Depolarization)

Models are theoretical representations of the mechanisms of polarization and depolarization, and describe how mechanisms operate in relation to polarizing and depolarizing forces.

- Listening, attention, persuasion, and communication
- Learning (cognitive, social, and emotional)
- Intellectual humility
- Curiosity and cognitive flexibility
- Trust
- Cultural evolution
- Identity and affiliation
- Agency
- Social dynamics (including the effects of networks and groups on beliefs and behavior)
- Worldview (including spiritual and religious beliefs)
- Critical thinking and argumentation
- Values (including collectivist and individualistic)
- Character virtues (including humility, kindness, and charity) and vices (including pride, greed, and wrath)
- Emotion and stress (including anxiety, fear, and loneliness)
- Cognitive biases
- Pluralistic ignorance
- Social conformity

MEASUREMENTS (Indicators of Underlying Internal Mechanisms of Polarization and Depolarization)

Measurements are measurable indicators directly related to the specific mechanisms in the theoretical models.

STATES OF POLARIZATION

States of polarization are those in which the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society no longer range along a continuum but become concentrated at opposing extremes (Merriam-Webster definition).

- Affective polarization
- Ideological polarization
- Political polarization
- Opinion polarization
- Social polarization
- Elite polarization
- Mass polarization
- Party polarization
- Pernicious polarization
- Benign polarization
- Perceptual polarization
- Socio-political polarization

Please download [our Application Guidance Document \(PDF\)](#) for full instructions.



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