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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 48(0)

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Publication Date

2026

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Peer reviewed

Need for Cognition and Contrast Amplification in Political Outgroup Representations

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Abstract

Evidence suggests that hostility toward members of the opposing political party (affective polarization) reflects how individuals mentally represent political outgroups more than actual ideological distance. We test a cognitive pathway in which motivated cognitive engagement sharpens representational contrasts between social categories, amplifying perceived extremity and downstream evaluative inferences. In a census-matched U.S. sample ($N = 302$), participants completed measures of Need for Cognition (NFC), perceived outgroup attitude strength, trait attributions, and outgroup dislike. Higher NFC predicted stronger perceived outgroup extremity, which was associated with increased negative trait inferences and indirectly predicted dislike. Though we are careful about causal claims, these findings suggest that cognitively engaged individuals may engage more in contrast amplification, sharpening category boundaries in social belief space and transforming graded ideological differences into globally negative person representations. This work links political polarization to the kind of representational distortion we see arising for other contrast-based categories.