

COMMENTARY

Depoliticizing DEI: Path to fulfillment of its core values and effective implementation

Hwayeon Myeong

Department of Psychological Sciences, Rice University, Houston, USA
Email: hm60@rice.edu

The focal article (Follmer et al., 2024) describes the mounting threats to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives posed by conservative legislative initiatives, providing advice for individuals, organizations, educators, and researchers to persist in their DEI efforts despite these challenges. Expanding on these strategies, this commentary argues for a more fundamental approach to ensuring the sustainability of DEI efforts: depoliticizing DEI. It discusses the rationales for depoliticizing DEI, examines the reasons for the current bipartisan divide, and proposes strategies to bridge this gap.

Rationales for depoliticizing DEI

First, depoliticizing DEI initiatives is essential for their effective implementation. The political divide will exacerbate inconsistency in local policies on DEI, fragmenting its implementation and undermining its collective impact. Given that large-scale social change comes from better cross-sector coordination rather than isolated interventions (Kania & Kramer, 2011), DEI efforts are most effective when there is a unified approach across sectors and regions. Depoliticizing DEI can also promote its broader acceptance and sustainability. Addressing the political lens through which DEI efforts are often viewed can mitigate resistance and foster bipartisan support (Feinberg & Willer, 2015, 2019). Political bias increases affective motivation, leading to decisions driven by ingroup favoritism rather than factual accuracy, hindering balanced consideration of arguments and merit-based decision making (Fishkin et al. 2021). Depoliticizing DEI can foster a collaborative environment to discuss unbiased, evidence-based strategies and enhance sustainability by reducing the risk of policy rollbacks during political shifts.

Second, depoliticizing DEI is necessary to uphold its core values. DEI initiatives seek to address biases against groups of people based on their social categories. However, evidence shows that people often recall statements from political elites as generic, consistent with stereotypes (e.g., Democrats favor affirmative action), regardless of the original message (Novoa et al., 2023). Intergroup biases hinder information processing and diminish the benefits of diversity. Although diversity involves embracing visible and invisible differences, the political divide on DEI exacerbates biases, limiting the recognition and acceptance of diverse perspectives. Furthermore, the bipartisan rift on DEI threatens equity and inclusion because inconsistent policies across regions and organizations create unequal access to benefits from DEI.

Third, although DEI is primarily aligned with liberal ideologies, it is not mutually exclusive with conservative values. Whereas liberals prioritize compassion, nurturance, and social justice, conservatives endorse loyalty, authority, and sanctity; valuing patriotism, traditionalism, and religious purity (Feinberg & Willer, 2019). Notably, the moral values of conservatives and DEI often support each other. For example, perceived organizational justice is a crucial predictor of

organizational loyalty (Mehdad & Khoshnami, 2016). Conversely, conservative values such as authority ensure that DEI policies are adhered to across the organization, with leadership style impacting the effective implementation of DEI (Cooper et al., 2023).

Further, real-world instances show that DEI initiatives can garner broad political support. In 2017, the UK Conservative Party implemented mandatory gender pay gap reporting for companies with 250 or more employees, aiming to close the gender pay gap (Milner, 2019). Additionally, Republican Senator Tim Scott played a pivotal role in the First Step Act of 2018, a bipartisan bill to reduce recidivism and reform sentencing laws. He also introduced the Walter Scott Notification Act, an amendment to the First Step Act, which mandates reporting details about officer-related shootings to increase transparency and accountability (Harper, 2020). Still, DEI often sparks political divides. The following section explores the reasons behind this.

Factors contributing to the current DEI polarization

First, advantaged groups' desire to maintain their in-group interests is an important driver leading to anti-DEI initiatives and system justification beliefs. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) argue that the underlying motivation of advantaged groups is more about maintaining dominance than ensuring system fairness. Supporting this, evidence shows that advantaged groups favor policies benefiting their in-group and face less opposition if their interests are not threatened (Brown et al., 2022; Lowery et al., 2006). As the focal article notes, zero-sum beliefs and the myth of meritocracy contribute to conservative resistance to DEI initiatives, legitimizing a hierarchical society and prejudice against disadvantaged groups (Son Hing et al., 2011).

However, it should be noted that the conceptualization of meritocracy is nuanced and often misunderstood. According to Son Hing and colleagues (2011), the myth of meritocracy is a descriptive belief that society currently operates on meritocratic principles, whereas the prescriptive preference for meritocracy is a belief that outcomes should be distributed based on individuals' relevant merits (e.g., abilities and performance), not irrelevant factors (e.g., gender and race). Son Hing et al. (2011) reveal that, unlike the myth of meritocracy, the prescriptive preference for meritocracy does not correlate with hierarchy-legitimizing ideologies, such as system justification beliefs, prejudice, and social dominance orientation. Importantly, in the context of DEI resistance, both the myth of meritocracy and the misunderstanding that DEI threatens the principle of meritocracy are at play. Evidence shows that opposition to affirmative action increases when it is perceived as violating principles of justice and merit (Iyer, 2022).

Although conservative opposition to DEI has often been attributed to nonmoral factors such as in-group favoritism, it is also driven by moral motivations rooted in conservative values (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Liberals and conservatives possess systematically different moral profiles, leading to divergent moral intuitions and attitudes (Graham et al., 2009). The rhetoric used by both the left and right often mirrors their moral frameworks, with liberals typically framing policy positions with the principles of care and fairness, whereas conservatives focus on loyalty, authority, and freedom (Feinberg & Willer, 2015; Thomas et al., 2023). Although moral rhetoric can unite those who already share one's political convictions, it is counterproductive for persuading political rivals. Exposure to the other side's moral rhetoric can increase commitment to one's existing stance and create greater animosity toward the opposing side (Feinberg & Willer, 2019). Nevertheless, even when persuading political opponents, both liberals and conservatives tend to rely on their own moral values as the basis of their arguments (Feinberg & Willer, 2015).

Consistent evidence from moral reframing literature suggests that the current divide in DEI may, in part, stem from rhetoric framed with liberal values. For example, when liberal participants were asked to write arguments supporting same-sex marriage to appeal to conservatives, most arguments reflected liberal moral foundations, with only a minority aligning with conservative principles (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). Feinberg and Willer (2015) show that DEI efforts, including

universal healthcare and same-sex marriage, can garner bipartisan support when framed with conservative values. For example, they found that arguments for ObamaCare framed in terms of purity concerns (e.g., preventing the spread of disease) were more persuasive to conservatives than fairness-based arguments. Similarly, Thomas and colleagues (2023) found that describing a cash-based welfare policy, universal basic income, in terms of financial freedom increased conservative support and reduced negative stereotyping against policy beneficiaries.

Last, false polarization, a greater perceived divide than reality (Ahler & Sood, 2018) contributes to DEI polarization. Although positive intergroup contact predicts better intergroup attitudes, more than half of Republicans and Democrats have few or no close friends who belong to the opposing party (Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Additionally, many people, especially political moderates, avoid discussing politics with those holding opposing views (Settle & Carlson, 2019). This leaves the debate to the most aggressive and least representative voices online (Rathje et al., 2021), fostering false polarization. For instance, the term "social justice warrior" is often used online to ridicule DEI advocates, creating skepticism and hostility about DEI efforts among conservatives. Although such extreme attitudes may not represent the majority conservative stance, false polarization leads to greater actual polarization through the self-fulfilling process (Ahler & Sood, 2018).

Strategies to mitigate DEI polarization

To mitigate conservatives' resistance to DEI, it is crucial to address zero-sum beliefs, which suggest that benefits to one group come at the expense of another. These misperceptions often stem from ingrained biases and societal narratives portraying resources as limited commodities. Brown and colleagues (2022) suggest that zero-sum beliefs among advantaged groups diminish when assured that their access to resources will not be harmed. Practitioners should articulate that DEI efforts do not reduce opportunities for advantaged groups but rather create benefits for all. Emphasizing the broader scope of DEI beyond race and gender, including neurodiversity and weight bias, and highlighting the overall benefits for the community can reinforce that everyone gains from effective DEI implementation (Iyer, 2022).

Fostering a nuanced understanding of meritocracy can also address the misunderstanding that DEI threatens meritocracy ideals, bridging the bipartisan divide. It should be clarified that although the belief that meritocracy currently exists in our society is erroneous and should be addressed from the DEI perspective, DEI initiatives do not attempt to dismantle the merit-based distributive principle. Instead, they highlight how structural disadvantages hinder meritocratic ideals and work to uphold these core values. Thus, reframing DEI programs as tools to truly enhance meritocracy by ensuring equal opportunities for all can be a promising strategy to garner bipartisan support. Future research should investigate whether an intervention clarifying the compatibility of DEI and meritocracy ideals can reduce polarization around DEI.

Additionally, moral reframing is a promising strategy to ensure that people across the political spectrum feel psychologically safe about participating in DEI programs. By adapting DEI messaging to reflect important values across the political spectrum, DEI programs can become more politically inclusive. Future research can investigate whether moral reframing techniques enhance the effectiveness of DEI programs. In educational settings, curricula can be designed to incorporate conservative moral foundations, such as loyalty, authority, and sanctity, alongside traditional liberal values. This might involve highlighting how DEI initiatives support community cohesion, family, national progress, and respect for tradition. Further, practitioners can engage conservative stakeholders in developing DEI programs to ensure moral alignment and foster a sense of ownership and inclusivity.

Last, encouraging bipartisan contact and open dialogue can contribute to breaking the negative cycle of false polarization on DEI and fostering collaborative relationships. Promoting respectful bipartisan dialogue within DEI programs can also demonstrate DEI's genuine commitment to inclusivity for individuals with diverse ideological beliefs. Organizations can facilitate this by creating structured environments for cross-group contacts, such as workshops or discussion forums on DEI policies. Practitioners and educators can host public forums and panel discussions that feature speakers from across the political spectrum discussing DEI while ensuring these events are moderated to maintain civility and focus on constructive dialogue. Future research should explore how structured bipartisan dialogue impacts polarization and enhances DEI program effectiveness. Studies could examine how various formats and settings for cross-group interactions influence DEI attitudes and foster collaboration and understanding across ideological divides. Investing in training programs that emphasize listening, empathy, and respect for differing viewpoints can make DEI initiatives more inclusive and effective, promoting a culture of mutual respect and ultimately contributing to the advancement of our society.

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