Melting the Polarization Ice Caps: Comparing the Effects of Mindfulness and Loving-Kindness Meditation on Affective Polarization

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Will an 8-week mindfulness course and an 8-week loving-kindness meditation course reduce people's relative dislike towards opposing political parties compared to their own (referred to as affective polarization)?
- Will the 8-week courses produce a lasting reduction in affective polarization?
- Which course will produce a greater reduction in affective polarization?

INTRODUCTION

- Affective polarization in America is defined as the relative dislike of opposing political parties compared to one's own (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).
- Mindfulness meditation involves the nonjudgmental awareness of thoughts (Mahaira et al., 2026). Many specific kinds of meditation, such as loving-kindness, fall under the umbrella term of mindfulness.
- Loving-kindness meditation (LKM) is a type of meditation that involves sending specific positive thoughts towards oneself, one's friends, and even people one dislikes (Gazder et al., 2025).
- Affective polarization is proven to promote division, misinformation, and close-mindedness (Brundidge et al., 2024). This can slow and undermine the democratic process (Abad Borger et al., 2026).
- Past research suggests that an 8-week mindfulness course produced a lasting reduction in affective polarization. (Simonsson et al., 2022).
- Another study suggests that LKM can produce a greater reduction in affective polarization than general mindfulness in the short term. (Ramstetter et al., 2025)
- However, no study has compared which condition (mindfulness or LKM) can produce a greater reduction in affective polarization in the long term.

HYPOTHESES

- We hypothesize that:
  - LKM will reduce trait affective polarization to a significant degree.
  - LKM will reduce affective polarization more than general mindfulness will.

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METHOD

Participants

- To recruit participants, we will send an email out to all students at Muhlenberg and provide $75 for participation.
- We will emphasize in the email that people who have prior experience with mediation will be excluded from the study.
- Along with the email, posters containing all the aforementioned information will be put up around the student union and academic buildings.

Measures

- **Affective Polarization** (Iyengar et al., 2019). This will be measured as a two item scale where each item will ask how participants feel about a particular political party from 0 (cold) to 100 (warm). The final measure will be participant ratings of the opposing political party subtracted by their ratings towards their own.
- **Meditation Courses** A meditation expert will be hired to design and instruct each of the 8-week meditation courses. The general mindfulness and LKM courses will both start with 3 weeks of general mindfulness, and then the LKM course will focus on LKM practices while the general mindfulness course will focus on pain and stress reduction practices.
- **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale** (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale has ten multiple choice questions, where the participant chooses which of the 4 answers most align with them ("On the whole, I am [very disappointed/disappointed/satisfied/very satisfied] with myself.").
- **Mini Depression Anxiety Stress Scale** (Mini-DASS; Monteiro et al., 2023). This scale has 4 items each to measure anxiety, depression, and stress, resulting in a 12-item scale.
- **Propensity to Trust in Humans Scale** (Scholz et al., 2025). Participants are given statements regarding their extent of trust in others and asked to respond on a 5-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."
- Participants will be given a manipulation and suspicion check.

Procedure

- After giving informed consent, participants will complete a survey on their demographic information and report their political affiliation, strength of affiliation with the party, and whether they were participating in other wellness courses.
- Participants will be randomly assigned to one of three conditions: an 8-week general mindfulness course, an 8-week loving-kindness meditation (LKM) course, or a waitlist control group.
- Immediately following course completion, participants will take the measure of affective polarization and once again report their political affiliation, strength of affiliation with the party, and whether they were participating in other wellness courses. Then, they will complete a set of three scales in this order: self esteem scale, distress scale, and trust scale.
- These measures will be repeated 1 month and 3 months after course completion.
- After course completion, participants will take the manipulation check, and 3 months after completion they will take the suspicion check.
- Participants will be debriefed following the final measure of affective polarization.

PROPOSED ANALYSES

- The hypothesis will be tested using multiple one-way analyses of variance.
- For each ANOVA, meditation condition is the independent variable and affective polarization is the dependent variable.
- We will repeat this ANOVA immediately after course completion and at the 1 and 3 month marks after course completion.
- We anticipate that people in the LKM condition will score the highest on affective polarization, people in the mindfulness condition will score the next highest, and the control condition will have the lowest score on affective polarization.
- Moreover, we expect the pattern of results and effect sizes to stay the same, demonstrating that we have predicted trait reduction in affective polarization.



LIMITATIONS

- Sampling
  - College-age samples only
  - College campus is not representative of U.S. political breakdown (left-leaning bias)
  - Sample mainly includes people from Northeast (left-leaning bias)
- Measurement
  - Relies on self-reported attitude, not behavior; we do not know if individuals will *act* less polarized

CONCLUSION

- If our hypotheses are supported, this study would highlight that mindfulness and LKM specifically are capable of decreasing affective polarization. These findings would be helping in creating new tools to fight the rising polarization in the U.S. and abroad (Abad Borger et al., 2026).
- Decreasing affective polarization may also reduce it's negative effects, and help people be more open-minded (Brundidge et al., 2024).
- Further research could look into the effects of other specific kinds of meditation on affective polarization, since this study would only focus on LKM's effect.
- Further research could also explore possible positive effects of meditation (and/or LKM specifically) in other aspects of life, such as conflict management or therapy.

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