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Outgroup criticism motivates hostile retribution

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Western societies are increasingly divided into cohesive subgroups. We argue that the defensive rejection of criticism from outgroup members (intergroup sensitivity) contributes to this schism by spurring hostile defensive behaviors. Using diverse international samples, ten behavioral experiments show that group members prioritize counterarguing outgroup criticism over getting their individual tasks done (Experiments 1-5, total $N = 656$) and pay more to punish critical outgroup commenters (Experiments 6-10, total $N = 787$), in comparison to the same criticism made by an ingroup member. These behaviors were goal-directed: Attaining the defense goal through alternative means (group affirmation) reduced counterarguing and improved performance after outgroup criticism (Experiments 4 & 5) and neutral comments did not elicit costly punishment (Experiment 7). Two large-scale registered reports ($N = 1459$ and $N = 828$) confirm this effect but challenge existing theoretical assumptions. We discuss how constructive, critical debate can help mend, instead of increase, the societal divide.

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