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Peer-review report of

Leach, C.W., Ferguson, S.T. & Wondimu, B.B. (2026). Beyond progress vs. regress: Societal change as dynamic social evolution. *advances.in/psychology*, 1, e648338. https://doi.org/10.56296/aip00073

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Round 1

Editor

Date: 2026-07-19

Dear Author,

I have now received the two reviews for your manuscript, “Beyond Progress vs. Regress: Societal Change as a Dynamic Evolution,” which is being considered for the special issue on the Psychology of Pushback in *advances.in/psychology*. These two reviewers are experts on this topic. All of us who read and reviewed the manuscript see considerable promise in your work. Your manuscript is highly relevant to the focus of the special issue. The argument about why pushback should be viewed in the context of dynamic evolution (vs. an oscillation between progress and regress) is thought-provoking and important; you have offered many interesting and valuable insights. Reviewer 1 writes, “The manuscript is well written, powerfully argued, and largely succeeds in balancing conceptual exposition, illustrative examples, and methodological implications.” Reviewer 2 adds, “I enjoyed reading this paper and found its perspective refreshing.” However, while the reviewers and I appreciate the potential of your work for shaping the way the psychology of pushback is conceived theoretically and pursued empirically, we all had suggestions concerning how the current manuscript can be improved to achieve greater impact. Thus, I invite you to revise your manuscript for further consideration. Although I cannot guarantee the outcome—it will depend on how effectively you address the issues raised—I would not invite this revision unless I believed the manuscript had the potential to be published in this special issue.

Fortunately, the two reviewers, who have obviously devoted considerable time and effort to your work, provide numerous thoughtful and specific suggestions. In general, the changes being requested involve making the new and distinctive theoretical contribution of your work clearer to readers, streamlining the manuscript, and clarifying some of the points you present. I will not reiterate all of the reviewers’ points in this letter, but I urge you to consider the reviewers’ excellent advice as you revise the manuscript.

One central issue, which occurred to me in my personal reading of your manuscript and is highlighted by each of the reviewers, involves questions and concerns about the novelty of the contribution of the work. We all appreciated the way you have synthesized relevant research and theory to make the case for dynamic evolution, but the case for your novel insights into the literature is not as evident and persuasive as it needs to be. The reviewers and I recognized numerous valuable insights that you offer, but the nature of the theoretically unique contribution of your work needs to be foregrounded more. Reviewer 1 observes, “The manuscript argues that its analysis provides a significant conceptual advance. However, at several points the proposed account appeared similar to analyses that have already been advanced.” Reviewer 2 notes, “My main concern is that much of what the manuscript presents as a new lens is already supplied, and in places supplied more precisely, by established frameworks that the paper either cites in passing or omits.” While the current version of the manuscript asserts the novelty of your work, it is important that the revised version of the manuscript makes a more compelling case to experts in

this area, such as these two reviewers, about how your work advances theory and guides research on this topic in novel ways.

Responses to several of the reviewers' recommendations for revision can also be integrated into the changes you make to clarify the novel contribution of your work. For instance, as Reviewer 1 (pt. 1) requests, please "clarify the target of the critique." I am not asking that you reframe the work around a critique of any specific scholar in this area, but the references to "observers" are too vague. Please direct readers to specific works so that they can engage more deeply with the issues you raise. This would also help address the Reviewers' concerns about the seeming "straw man" quality of some arguments. It is also important as you develop the case for the novelty of your work that, as Reviewer 2 asks, you consider intergroup threat theory, which "already describes a reciprocal threat spiral," "state plainly what schismo-genesis predicts or explains that self-categorization theory together with a threat account does not," and engage more with the formal modelling literature. I also recommend adding a section (or subsection) that addresses Reviewer 2's Point 2 concerning "falsifiability and predictive content" in which you propose ways that the novel implications of your work can be empirically tested. This would not only further emphasize the novelty of your ideas but also help set a concrete agenda for future research on the psychology of backsliding. Although the revision I am requesting is substantial, I believe many of the necessary elements are already present in your manuscript. The challenge resides in crystallizing your points in a way that presents the distinct theoretical contribution of your ideas in a more persuasive way. We all share the goal of making this work as valuable and influential as it can be.

In addition to the fundamental issue, please address other irrelevant issues raised by the reviewers. There is overlap in several of their points. For instance, both emphasize the need for greater conceptual clarity and precision (see Reviewer 1's points 2 and 4; Reviewer 2's point 5). Please also strengthen the connection between your work and not only the theme of the special issue but also, where possible, to companion contributions that offer contrasting or complementary perspectives, and that you situate your argument relative to them rather than developing it in isolation. Two relevant pieces are:

- https://advances.in/psychology/10.56296/aip00053/ (an alternative perspective)
- https://advances.in/psychology/10.56296/aip00055/ (a complementary perspective)

Like Reviewer 1 (point 5), I ask that you acknowledge the US focus or include more non-US examples. I believe that, given the breadth of your interests and experience, the latter would not be difficult for you to do. In addition, like Reviewer 2, I encourage you to try to streamline (aka shorten) the manuscript. I believe that eliminating material that is tangential to making the case for the significant, novel contribution of your work will help foreground your central arguments and make the manuscript more influential. Of the three options Reviewer 2 suggests, I favor Option C: making it a tightened agenda-setting piece.

I also agree with Reviewer 2 that you prune some figures that are not necessary. As a matter of policy, the journal accepts only original figures, and we ask that you not reproduce any figure that contain elements that are neither new nor your own. Here are some specific thoughts about each figure.

1. *Figure 1* is not needed. The tendency it shows is well described in the text.
2. *Figure 2* does not add substantive information beyond what the text already conveys, and it seems to contain images licensed to Shutterstock. Please omit the figure.
3. *Figure 3* is informative, but we accept only original figures, so it cannot be retained as presented.
4. *Figure 4* is not needed, since the principle is well described in the text, and it is not original to this article.
5. *Figure 5* adds very little relevant information. Please omit it.
6. *Figure 6* is neither an effective nor a professional-looking presentation. If you wish to keep it, please supply a new figure that contains no cartoon figures and no network graphics obtained from unidentified sources. My view, however, is that the figure is not needed, as the point is straightforward and already described in the text.

To avoid any unnecessary back and forth, there are also a number of specific, presentational points that your revised manuscript should address:

1. **Define schismo-genesis on first use.** In Part II you relate schismo-genesis to other frameworks and describe later theories as "successors," but you never actually define the concept and its main components/subconcepts. Please provide a clear definition at the point of introduction, before relating it to other work.
2. **Abstract.** Please remove all citations from the abstract.
3. **DOIs.** Please present all journal-article DOIs in URL format.
4. **Citation style.** Please follow APA7 throughout, including the use of the ampersand rather than "and" in parenthetical citations. For example, "Krus and Blackman 1980; Leach and Bou Zeineddine, 2021" should appear as "Krus & Blackman, 1980; Leach & Bou Zeineddine, 2021."
5. **Reference completeness.** Roughly ten in-text citations are missing from the reference list, and there are several further inconsistencies between the text and the references. Please work through these iteratively using our free tool at https://apa.advances.in. The tool is probabilistic, so a few false positives occur, but in our experience the issues it flags usually reflect real inconsistencies in the manuscript.

I recognize that this letter has focused primarily on the issues – general and specific – that have concerned those of us who reviewed your manuscript. So, I wanted to conclude by reminding you that we all saw the potential in your work as a significant agenda-setting piece. It is timely, informative, and stimulating. I would very much like to see it included in the special issue – it offers a valuable perspective on the topic of the psychology of pushback. We hope you found the comments to be constructive and instructive, as they were intended. If you have any questions or if there is anything you would like to discuss, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Given that the requested changes mainly involve textual revisions and streamlining, not the addition of new sections, to wrap up the special issue, we would like to receive your revised

manuscript (through the *advances.pub* portal) within two months. However, if you feel that would be too tight a deadline, please feel free to suggest an alternative timeline. Please also include a cover letter explaining how you have revised the manuscript and addressed the issues that have been raised.

Thank you again for your interest in publishing your work in *advances.in/psychology*, and for your cooperation throughout the editorial process. I look forward to seeing the revised version of your manuscript in the not-too-distant future.

Sincerely,

John F. Dovidio

Special Issue Editor & Senior Consulting Editor

Reviewer 1

This is a thought-provoking and timely paper that makes a compelling case for moving beyond the simple, linear modes of thinking that continue to dominate much of our empirical practice, even when our theories imply more dynamic and reciprocal processes. The manuscript is well written, powerfully argued, and largely succeeds in balancing conceptual exposition, illustrative examples, and methodological implications. I particularly appreciated its effort to encourage researchers to think more carefully about complexity, feedback loops, and the limitations of conventional approaches within psychology to studying social and political phenomena.

At the same time, I think there are several areas where the paper could be strengthened.

1. Clarify the target of the critique. Throughout the manuscript there are references to “observers” who purportedly interpret phenomena such as rising authoritarianism, polarisation, and illiberal attitudes in overly simplistic ways. I share the broader concern motivating this critique. As a scientific community, we do not always subject claims about societal trends and their causes to sufficiently rigorous scrutiny. More generally, we often think and talk in terms of main effects and only grapple seriously with conditionality, contingency, and interaction when replication failures, inconsistent findings or reviewers (ha!) force us to do so.

However, the discussion occasionally takes on a somewhat straw-man quality. There are two examples on the first page and, beyond these, it was not always clear who these “observers” are or where the allegedly simplistic reasoning is evidenced in the literature. I am not a deep expert in polarisation, but I think most researchers would agree that it is an evolving process (see p5 - or even series of processes) but would also reject the idea that it was “perpetual” (p11). The notion of a “presumed centrifugal force” risks misrepresentation. The argument would be strengthened by providing more explicit examples drawn from the literature or public discourse and more patiently unpacking the (implicit and explicit) assumptions of those. Doing so would help readers concretely identify the problem and exactly what forms of reasoning the authors seek to challenge.

Relatedly, my own reading of the field is that many contemporary theories already emphasize dynamic, recursive, and relational processes, whereas our methods often do a much poorer job of testing such claims. The authors may disagree with this assessment – and I am not suggesting that they need to agree – but I think it would be useful to distinguish more clearly whether the

manuscript's critique is directed primarily at theories, methods, or both. Such clarification would sharpen the contribution.

2. A second issue concerns definitional clarity. Most notably, the concept of schismo-genesis is introduced (p. 18), yet its implications are discussed before its meaning is fully established. I was missing an explicit definition of what it is, its disciplinary origins (anthropology?) and how it differs from related concepts.

The paper would benefit from a more explicit definition when the concept is first introduced, along with a concise explanation of its core features and boundaries. This would make it easier to follow the subsequent discussion and assess the value of the concept.

3. Clarify the novelty of the proposed framework. The manuscript argues that its analysis provides a significant conceptual advance. However, at several points the proposed account appeared similar to analyses that have already been advanced – for example, the conclusion that "schismo-genesis explains polarization as the result of simultaneous mutually reinforcing assimilation within a party and contrast between parties" (p21) is similar to the conclusions drawn by Smith et al. and Bliuc et al. This raises the question of whether a new concept is necessary, or whether the contribution lies instead in synthesizing and extending existing approaches.

Relatedly, the paper would benefit from more explicitly positioning itself relative to other recent work that advances complex-systems or complexity-oriented meta-theoretical perspectives on related topics – most notably, other papers led by Leach, Bou Zeineddine and colleagues have made similar points.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the present paper lacks novelty. Rather, I think readers would benefit from a more explicit discussion of what this framework contributes beyond these existing accounts, where it departs from them, and what additional explanatory leverage it provides.

4. Objective versus subjective change. The discussion on pp. 24–25 raises an important point about the arbitrariness of selecting a frame of reference against which "change" is evaluated. Reading this section prompted me to wonder about the distinction between absolute and perceived change. The manuscript discusses judgments of change, but it is not always clear whether the focus is on objective changes in social or political conditions, subjective perceptions of change, or the interaction between the two.

Given the importance of perception in many of the phenomena under discussion, some clarification of the distinction between objective and subjective change would strengthen the argument. This may also help address questions about whose frame of reference is being privileged and how competing interpretations of change emerge. Change is, itself, in the eye of the beholder and likely reflects one's position in a social structure.

5. The examples and contextual framing throughout the paper draw heavily on United States politics and society. While this is understandable given the prominence of these debates, the manuscript would benefit from acknowledging this orientation and discussing the extent to which the proposed framework is expected to generalize beyond the US context. Some acknowledgement would help readers evaluate the broader applicability of the arguments.

Minor comments

- Sapolsky (2005) and Raccuia and DellaPosta (2025) are cited in the text but missing from the reference list.
- Is it scismogenesis (as in the heading on p20) or schismo-genesis (as elsewhere).
- It would be helpful to provide clearer information on where readers can access Ferguson et al., given that the penultimate pages rely on it.

Reviewer 2

The submission reframes political polarization as a between-group feedback process, and the reminder that judgments of "progress" and "regress" depend heavily on the timescale an analyst chooses. Both are worth developing. I enjoyed reading this paper and found its perspective refreshing. At the same time, I have substantial concerns. My central reservations concern the novelty of the contribution relative to established theory, the development of the paper's own central claim, and the scope and length of the manuscript.

Substantive points

1. Novelty relative to existing theory. My main concern is that much of what the manuscript presents as a new lens is already supplied, and in places supplied more precisely, by established frameworks that the paper either cites in passing or omits. The account of polarization as simultaneous within-group convergence and between-group divergence, with intergroup contact intensifying rather than softening the divide, maps closely onto self-categorization theory and the metacontrast principle, which already predict that a group prototype shifts toward the pole that maximizes distinctiveness from a salient outgroup, producing exactly the contrast and extremitization the paper attributes to schismo-genesis. Social identity theory supplies the motivational basis (the drive for positive distinctiveness), and realistic group conflict theory supplies the escalating reciprocal hostility that the paper labels symmetrical schismo-genesis. Most striking to me, the manuscript devotes a full subsection to affective polarization, threat, and emotion-driven cascades, yet never engages intergroup threat theory, which is the canonical social-psychological account of threat-driven intergroup emotion and which, read dynamically, already describes a reciprocal threat spiral. The revision needs to confront this directly. Please state plainly what schismo-genesis predicts or explains that self-categorization theory together with a threat account does not, and revise the framing accordingly. If the answer is that the added value lies in temporality and explicit feedback rather than in a new mechanism, then the honest move is to position the paper as a bridge between the social-psychological content of identity theory and dynamical-systems formalism, rather than presenting Bateson as though the identity theories lacked the relevant engine.

2. Falsifiability and predictive content. As written, the framework risks accommodating any observation after the fact. Rising polarization is schismo-genesis, falling polarization is negative feedback, and apparent stability is reinterpreted as change that is masked or neutralized by countervailing change, as in the income inequality discussion. A scheme that absorbs rise, fall, asymmetry, symmetry, and stasis with equal ease predicts nothing in particular. This is sharpened by the relativity-of-timescale argument: if every judgment of change is relative to an arbitrary reference window, the paper owes the reader principled criteria for selecting windows. The manuscript acknowledges the need but supplies no such criteria, so the charge it levels at others,

that they impose arbitrary timeframes, applies to the paper as well. Please add concrete, defensible guidance on timescale selection, and state at least one prediction that could in principle be wrong.

3. The progress versus regress framing. The target is, in places, a partial straw man. The scholars named (for example the cultural-backlash and democratic-backsliding literatures) are not committed to a naive unidirectional view of history; they make empirical claims about specific recent trends. Knocking down the strong linear reading overstates the payoff of the dynamic alternative. Please engage these positions as they are actually argued, and show what your account adds once they are stated charitably.

4. Engagement with the formal modeling literature. The between-group repulsion mechanism you credit to schismo-genesis has already been formalized in the negative-influence and "differentiation without distancing" tradition (for example Mäs and Flache), which you cite only in passing. The revision should acknowledge that this work has done the formal version of your argument, and then show precisely what schismo-genesis adds beyond it. As it stands, several modeling sources are name-checked as allies rather than integrated, and the strong claims (for example that social influence alone is insufficient) are stated more broadly than the cited results support.

5. Conceptual precision and an internal tension. Two umbrella terms do rhetorical rather than analytical work. "System of systems" is invoked without specifying the systems, their boundaries, or their couplings, and "evolution" is used as a synonym for non-linear change rather than in any variation-selection-retention sense, which imports connotations the framework does not deploy. Please either operationalize these or use plainer language. Relatedly, the paper rests on two arguments that pull against each other: the dynamism argument treats non-linearity as an objective feature of the world, while the relativity argument treats the appearance of change as observer-dependent and frame-relative. If all characterizations are frame-relative, then "change is really dynamic" is itself just another frame-relative description. These need to be reconciled rather than routed together to the same conclusion.

6. Methods. Section III currently dissolves its own specificity by concluding that any method can serve provided it adopts the right meta-theory, and it offers no concrete guidance on estimating or testing schismo-genic dynamics from data. I encourage you either to give one or two concrete analytic strategies tied to the model called for in point 2, or to shorten this section considerably. I probably lean toward the latter (see next point).

Scope, length, and alternative framings

The manuscript (about 9k words) is too long for what it ultimately establishes, and it tackles several loosely federated arguments at once: a critique of declension narratives, an epistemological argument about measurement relativity, a reframing of ideologies as old and new, a mechanistic account of polarization, a meta-theoretical triad of time, ecology, and events, and a programmatic methods statement. Each could be removed without disturbing the others, which is a sign they are bound by a heading rather than by a single load-bearing argument. The substantive demonstration is almost entirely about polarization, while the title and abstract promise a general meta-theory, and the surrounding material (war cycles, income inequality, baboon troops, stock prices, the Black

Lives Matter case) reads as scattered illustration. I suggest a substantially shorter and more focused paper, and offer three possible framings:

- Option A (my recommendation): a focused theoretical paper on polarization as schismo-genesis. Here, you could develop the model called for in point 2, state one or two predictions that distinguish it from both the echo-chamber account and the self-categorization/intergroup conflict account, and reduce the isms discussion, the war and income-inequality material, and the empirical vignettes to brief framing. This is the most publishable path and the one that best fits the special issue.
- Option B: a focused meta-theoretical paper on the relativity of change and timescale selection. Here, you could center the Krus and Blackman argument, provide principled criteria for choosing timescales, and use polarization as a single illustration, demoting schismo-genesis to one section.
- Option C: a tightened agenda-setting piece. Here, you could keep the programmatic character, but subordinate every illustration to one explicitly stated claim and trim the methods section. Even as a position paper, the breadth currently signals ambition more than it delivers it.

Finally, I was confused by the figures. Several were not originally developed for this paper and it was not clear why they were needed. Others had a non-academic style, using bitmap icons, often comic style, which I think are inadequate for an original academic contribution.

I hope these comments are useful. I see the kernel of a worthwhile paper here if the central claim is developed with the rigor it calls for, its contribution relative to existing theory is stated precisely, and the scope is tightened.

Round 2

Editor

Date: 2026-10-09

Dear Authors,

I have now read and personally reviewed the latest version of your manuscript, “Beyond Progress vs. Regress: Societal Change as a Dynamic Evolution” (with Shaunette Ferguson and Betselot Biruck Wondimu as co-authors). I greatly appreciated your responsiveness to the comments and suggestions on your previous version, as well as your cooperation and patience throughout the process. I did not consider further consultation with the previous reviewers necessary. I believe that the latest version of your work is much improved, but I am requesting some additional, relatively minor changes. Unless some unanticipated issues arise, I anticipate that this will be the last round of editorial requests. I believe that your work can make a valuable and distinctive contribution to the special issue on the Psychology of Pushback in *advances.in/psychology*.

To facilitate your revision, I am including a track-changes version of your manuscript that includes suggested changes and comments plus adjustment to references. As you will see, the vast majority of these points involve formatting or presentational issues. If you have any questions about any of these, feel free to contact me directly. There is one point that I would like you to address in the next version. Early on in the manuscript, I would like you to add a couple of sentences that explicitly state whether the present work represents a conceptually new type of dynamical systems approach (and if so, how/why) or a novel application of an existing dynamical systems framework. Either framing, or an adapted version of either, would be acceptable. The reason behind my request is mainly to help orient readers to the main intended contribution of your work.

Because of the straightforward nature of the changes requested, in your cover letter for the next version you do *not* have to itemize any of the recommended changes that you have incorporated into the manuscript. Also, as I mentioned, if there are any recommendations that are not clear or you would like to discuss, feel free to contact me, so we can avoid any unnecessary further rounds of revision.

Thank you again for your patience and perseverance. I am very pleased with how your manuscript has developed. I hope you feel the same. It should make an important contribution to the special issue, offering a stimulating conceptual perspective to The Psychology of Pushback. Given the limited nature of the revisions being requested and our desire to complete the special issue as soon as possible, I am asking that you submit the next version within 2-3 weeks. I understand how busy the beginning of the semester can be, so if you need a bit more time, please let me know. I hope to be able to see your work in the special issue in the near future.

Sincerely,

Jack Dovidio

Special Issue Co-Editor

Round 3

Editor

Date: 2026-11-02

Dear Authors,

Thank you for your prompt response to our latest editorial request and for the effort you and your co-authors devoted to revising the manuscript, We have appreciated your cooperativeness throughout the review/editorial process.

The current version is very strong and stimulating. It offers important insights and skillfully integrates diverse perspectives. It makes a valuable contribution to the special issue and should attract a wide audience. We are pleased to formally accept this version of the work for publication in *AdvancesIn: Psychology*. Congratulations!

We were delighted that you accepted our invitation to contribute to the Special Issue, and we are very pleased by the article that will soon appear as part of it.

We will begin processing the manuscript and, if we need any more information or have any questions, the Office will be in contact with you. We plan to move this forward quite quickly as we are completing the Special Issue in the near future.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Jack Dovidio