# Social Interaction and Extremism

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Although many radicalized religious, political, and ideological groups have used extreme tactics — such as vandalism, arson, harassment and intimidation, and cyber attacks — to try to change others' behavior not all groups seek to effect change in these ways. Many groups work to influence others' beliefs and behaviors through legal political processes. What, then, causes some people to choose radical action over traditional legal forms of political engagement?

In [a study published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*](), researchers Emma Thomas and Craig McGarty (Murdoch University) and researcher Winnifred Louis (University of Queensland) explored the role social interaction plays in how people agree upon and accept the need for both traditional and radical action strategies.

The authors examined the impact of social interaction on politicization and radicalization in the context of animal welfare — specifically, the issue of battery farming of chickens. Battery farming refers to the housing of chickens in small, identical cages that are connected together with shared dividers, similar to how the cells in a battery are constructed. Animal rights activists have argued that keeping chickens in this type of cage is unethical and inhumane.

While there has been some political success in regulating battery farming (mostly in Europe), animal rights groups have also resorted to tactics such as forcing entry into farms, releasing chickens, and vandalizing farm property.

The researchers had university students and members of the community read information about the practice of battery farming and the mistreatment of animals on these farms. Afterwards, they were told that although animal rights groups have spent years campaigning against battery farming, people continue to buy eggs from chickens caged in this manner.

Participants then read a paragraph priming either the legitimacy of legal political action to effect changes

in battery farming or the legitimacy of illegal radical action to effect changes in battery farming. After reading one of the two strategies, participants either immediately filled out a series of questionnaires and behavioral measures or conversed with a small group of three to six people before filling out the questionnaires and behavioral measures.

The questionnaires asked participants about their intentions to engage in political or radical actions, their willingness to break the law, their attribution of blame for the plight of battery-farmed hens, and the extent to which they had become aware of society as an important target of influence for change. Participants also were given the opportunity to write and sign a letter to a state minister expressing their opposition to battery farming.

The researchers found that discussion in both the political and radical conditions increased participants' awareness of the need to convince society of change, and, in turn, their willingness to engage in political actions such as joining a peaceful protest or donating to peaceful animal rights groups.

What about people's willingness to take radical action? When looking at the data, the researchers found that the participants who had been exposed to the radical strategy *and* who had also discussed this strategy were the most willing to support radical actions. Radical discussion was found to increase participants' willingness to break the law, in turn boosting their willingness to engage in behaviors such as illicitly rescuing chickens from factory farms and donating to animal rights groups who break the law.

These findings suggest that it is not simply the acceptance of radical beliefs that promotes extremist behavior, but rather the combination of these beliefs with exposure to like-minded others. From this point of view, radicalization can be thought of not as a product of specific religious, psychopathic, or cultural conditions but as a reproducible social process or pathway — something that opens up new experimental avenues for understanding the underlying processes that lead to political engagement and extremism.

**Reference**

Thomas, E. F., McGarty, C., & Louis, W. (2014). Social interaction and psychological pathways to political engagement and extremism. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 44*, 15–20.