

# POLARIZATION



## An Examination of Partisanship

Polarization currently challenges democracies around the world. It occurs when natural differences in society become aligned with mutually exclusive identities and interests, often manifesting in strong partisanship. While some theorize about its positive effects on democracy, severe polarization can threaten democracy itself. Understanding the causes and consequences of polarization can assist in addressing its potential negative impacts.



Severe polarization threatens both governability and social cohesion, and in turn, support for democracy in advanced and developing democracies alike.

- McCoy, Rahman, & Somer (2018)



## EFFECTS



### POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES

#### 1. Simplifies voters' choices

- Parties become very ideologically distinct, making the choice between parties more black and white.

#### 2. Mobilizes supporters

- Parties are able to gain more support mobilizing around a common enemy and offering supporters a group identity.

#### 3. Strengthens parties

- As parties become increasingly distinct and powerful, they strengthen their positions in opposition to other parties.



### NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

#### 1. Intergroup conflict

- Polarization creates a partisan social identity that favours in-party members relative to the out-party. This causes measurable dehumanization and stereotyping of the generalized 'other'.

#### 2. Increases social and geographic distance

- Polarization can lead to increased social and geographic distance between those with opposing viewpoints. Groups and individuals tighten their social circles to include only those who share their views, which in turn creates physical distance between groups.

#### 3. Weakens democratic norms and institutions

- Intergroup conflict and social distance can lead to members of the out-group questioning the moral legitimacy of political leaders in power. This can reduce the willingness to compromise, resulting in either gridlock or unilateral decision-making by the majority.

McCoy, Rahman, & Somer (2018)

## TRENDS



The simultaneous presence and absence of political polarization.

- Baldassarri & Bearman (2007)



Polarization has been described as a perception rather than a reality, with citizens and pundits alike noting its effects on politics. This perception may be caused by a public focus on polarizing issues such as LGBTQ rights, immigration, and abortion, which attract significant attention, and mask the range of political issues where there exists broad societal agreement. Political parties align themselves with specific stances on these issues to mobilize support. Even if political polarization is merely a perception, its consequences are real and significant and must be treated and studied as such.



The most vocal activists [cluster] at the extreme ends of the issue preference scales.

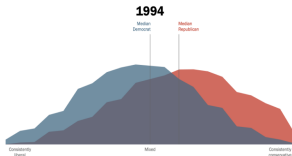
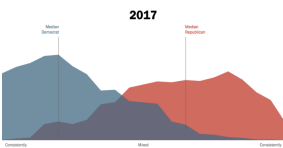
- Lauka, McCoy, & Firat (2018)



The media has also allowed the rhetoric of polarization and division to occupy the forefront of political discussion. This contributes to the perception that polarization is running rampant as the most vocal activists on each side dominate the political conversation and attract the most attention, presenting their views as the shared and accepted views of the broader group.

## CASE STUDY: USA

In the United States, polarization between Democrats and Republicans results in party identification becoming a strong factor in social identity, and contributes both to the demonization of members of the opposing party and to challenges to bipartisan efforts.



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These graphs demonstrate the increase in ideological distance between parties since 1994. As this distance has grown, party identification has solidified and the gap has been considered as too wide to bridge.



Partisanship as a social identity.

- Lauka, McCoy, & Firat (2018)



## FURTHER RESOURCES



### Why We're Polarized, With Jamelle Bouie

Ezra Klein

This is just one of a series of engaging podcasts, articles, and books by Klein which discuss political polarization, breaking down the forces behind it.

### America's Great Divide: From Obama to Trump

PBS Frontline

The Frontline 2 part documentary series explores the slow breakdown of Obama's promise of unity and how Donald Trump manipulated pre-existing divisions in society, heightening polarization and pitting partisan groups against each other.



### Is America Hopelessly Polarized, or Just Allergic to Politics?

By Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan

This article discusses polarization as an overstated phenomenon, instead turning to individuals distaste for politics.

### What Happened to America's Political Center of Gravity?

By Sahil Chinoy

This article discusses how America's political parties are positioned on the political spectrum, noting how far right the Republican Party is for a mainstream party.

## RECOMMENDED READING

### Mass Partisan Polarization: Measuring a Relational Concept

By Alban Lauka, Jennifer McCoy, and Rengin B. Firat

This article studies polarization at the level of political parties rather than individuals or ideology. It highlights the way political party identification becomes a social identity, creating hostility between parties and increasing polarization. This study measures mass polarization based on positive partisanship and negative partisanship in both multi-party and two-party systems. The scholars' work is particularly relevant to the study of polarization as it describes the impact of strong, unwavering party loyalty that seems to defy political self-interest and expectations.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Baldassarri, D., & Bearman, P. (2007). Dynamics of political polarization. *American Sociological Review*, 72(5), 784-811. doi:10.1177/000312240707200507

Baldassarri & Bearman discuss paradoxes regarding polarization. The first paradox involves the simultaneous absence and presence polarization and the second addresses individuals experiencing attitude homogeneity in interpersonal networks while their networks are characterized by attitude heterogeneity. The authors discuss polarization as a perception as opposed to a reality, although note that this does not diminish its need to be studied. This observation is highly interesting in light of reports that polarization is increasing globally.

Chinoy, S. (2019, June 26). What Happened to America's Political Center of Gravity? Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/26/opinion/sunday/republican-platform-far-right.html>

This article discusses how America's political parties are positioned on the political spectrum, noting how far right the Republican Party is even though it is a mainstream party. They note that the party falls significantly more to the right of most other mainstream parties, aligning more closely with fringe, alt-right parties of Europe. They place America's centre of political gravity to the right of most modern democracies. Additionally, they note that the two-party system leaves less room for fringe parties, causing them to be absorbed into the larger parties. Chinoy uses many graphics to help illustrate this positioning of parties making this article highly readable and informative.

Klar, S., Krupnikov, Y., & Ryan, J. B. (2019, April 12). Is America Hopelessly Polarized, or Just Allergic to Politics? Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/12/opinion/polarization-politics-democrats-republicans.html?smid=em-share>

This article discusses polarization as an overstated phenomenon, instead focusing on the influence on society of individuals' distaste for politics. Authors Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan emphasize the personal nature of politics that has divided the population, yet see this divide decrease when they decrease the amount of time politics is discussed. They find that those who are the most polarized are also those who have the strongest connection to their party. This again emphasizes the role of parties, rather than individuals or ideology, when it comes to understanding polarization. The article also offers readers further insight into the idea that polarization is more a perception than a troubling reality.

Klein, E. (2020, January 30). Why We're Polarized. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/episode/0sCo7ilewSLEzg0zUcvKKx?t=0>

In this podcast episode, Klein interviews New York Times columnist Jamelle Bouie, discussing many questions relating to polarization with a specific focus on the United States. Klein is highly knowledgeable on the topic of polarization, having released a book by the same title, “Why We’re Polarized”. This podcast offers listeners an entrypoint into the multifaceted world of polarization which they can further explore in Klein’s book.

Lauka, A., McCoy, J., & Firat, R. (2018). Mass partisan polarization: Measuring a relational concept. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 107-126.

This article studies polarization at the level of political parties rather than individuals or ideology. It highlights the way political party identification becomes a social identity, creating hostility between parties and increasing polarization. This study measures mass polarization based on positive partisanship and negative partisanship in both multi-party and two-party systems. The scholars work is particularly relevant to the study of polarization as it describes the impact of strong, unwavering party loyalty that seems to defy political self-interest and expectations.

McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16-42. doi:10.1177/0002764218759576

McCoy, Rahman, and Somer examine the consequences of polarization for democracy as an institution. They discuss polarization as being relational in nature, creating an “us versus them” mentality. Eventually, these forces can cause democratic erosion. While this article is already on the POLI 328 Syllabus, it should remain so, as it clearly outlines important argument and emphasizes the danger of increasing polarization.

PBS: Frontline. (2020). America's Great Divide: From Obama to Trump.

The Frontline two-part documentary series explores the slow breakdown of Obama's promise of unity and the way Donald Trump manipulated pre-existing divisions in society, heightening polarization and pitting partisan groups against each other. This documentary provides an interesting exploration of the way polarization can be used as a tool to strengthen parties and mobilize support, as exemplified by Donald Trump in 2016 and throughout his presidency. Director Michael Kirk creates an engaging documentary which provides an excellent illustration of how polarization operates in present-day democracy.

Political Polarization, 1994-2017. (2017, October 20). Retrieved from <https://www.people-press.org/interactives/political-polarization-1994-2017/>

The Pew Research Centre offers interactive graphs that illustrate the increasing polarization of America’s political parties. This visual approach allows viewers to observe the widening of the political divide in America throughout the 2000s.