



THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES.

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ABSTRACT

Political polarization has emerged as one of the most critical challenges to democratic governance in the United States. This paper examines the dynamics, institutional roots, and societal consequences of polarization through a multidisciplinary lens that integrates political science, democratic theory, and constitutional analysis. Drawing on recent studies of affective and ideological polarization, it argues that the erosion of institutional checks and balances—particularly the expansion of presidential authority and the decline of congressional compromise—has transformed polarization from a normative feature of pluralism into a destabilizing force. The analysis highlights how the growing divide between elites and the public undermines trust in institutions, erodes democratic norms, and fosters an environment conducive to political extremism. By engaging with comparative democracy research, including findings from the Varieties of Democracy Institute, the study situates U.S. polarization within a broader global pattern of democratic backsliding. It concludes that mitigating polarization requires restoring the balance of powers, strengthening deliberative mechanisms, and rebuilding a political culture of compromise as essential components of democratic resilience.

In current discussions regarding the “global crisis of democracy,” the concept of “political polarization” is frequently mentioned¹. Researchers have connected political polarization to various detrimental effects on democracy, such as a preference for confrontation over cooperation, moderation, and compromise; policy performance issues stemming from radical policy shifts; the solidification of policy stances; legislative gridlock; and challenges in forming coalitions. Moreover, political polarization has been linked to a decline in citizens’ trust in government, public institutions, and fellow citizens, along with decreased democratic satisfaction, support, and perceived legitimacy of elections and the

¹ Diamond, L. (2019, May 17). The global crisis of democracy. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved February 22, 2024, from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-global-crisis-of-democracy-11558105463>

democratic system itself². Additionally, it has been associated with increased acceptance and support for political violence and other undemocratic behaviors. Reflecting the numerous negative impacts it produces, comparative studies have identified political polarization as a key factor driving contemporary “democratic backsliding.”³

Remarkably, despite the fervent discussions surrounding political polarization, there is minimal agreement on its definition. In political science, disparate conceptual frameworks have emerged, resulting in incongruent interpretations of polarization that coexist uneasily. Research employing cluster analysis to examine attitudinal configurations is largely disconnected from studies focusing on public conflict. Competing notions of “affective” and “ideological” polarization vie for prominence. Various subtypes of polarization, deemed either beneficial or harmful, increase without clear definition of their characteristics or boundaries. Furthermore, the analytical connections between different conceptions of polarization and their implications for democratic politics remain unclear. The literature on polarization often relies on broad notions of increased conflict that lack a clear, defining essence, while frequently neglecting a potential core dimension: disputes over violations of democratic norms.

Political observers universally regard political polarization as a deeply concerning phenomenon that demands significant attention, a sentiment echoed by comparative political science. For example, the term “polarization” is mentioned 210 times within the relatively brief 60-page Democracy Report 2022 by the Varieties of Democracy Institute, which focuses on the evolving dynamics of “autocratization.”⁴ The volume of publications addressing political polarization has surged, with over half of all relevant journal articles (373 out of 704) published since 1975 appearing in the last five years alone (since 2018). Consequently, the concept has become “central to much of what constitutes the academic study of politics.” Despite ongoing debates about its nature, empirical trends, causes, and consequences, political polarization appears to encapsulate the troubled democratic spirit of our era⁵.

In the early nineteenth century, the term “polarization” had acquired diverse meanings within the natural sciences, describing what might seem to social scientists as rather exotic and incomprehensible movements of physical phenomena such as light, heat, electrodes, and raw sugar. The first documented figurative application of the word in the political arena dates back to 1862, when a troubled observer of British politics lamented “that wretched polarization of our whole national thought...into the two antagonistic currents of common Whiggism and common Toryism.”⁶ As this citation illustrates, from its early usage, the concept of political polarization has been employed to convey concerns about intensified confrontation between deeply entrenched political factions.

The concept of political polarization delineates a type of discord. Fundamentally, a “conflict” means a clash or active discord between opposing factions, differing from political

² Reiljan, A. (2020). 'Fear and loathing across party lines' (also) in Europe: Affective polarisation in European party systems. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(3), 376-396.

³ Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129-146.

⁴ Varieties of Democracy Institute. (2022). *Democracy report 2022: Autocratization changing nature?* University of Gothenburg.

⁵ Nugent, E. R. (2020). The psychology of repression and polarization. *World Politics*, 72(2), 291-334.

⁶ "Polarization" (Section II.5). (n.d.). In *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved from www.oed.com

consensus as it encompasses more than mere distinctiveness but falls short of outright warfare. Polarization, though not inherently violent, represents a form of political discord, often eliciting concerns of potential violence. Conversely, prevailing discourse on political polarization within the field of U.S. political science diverges from conventional linguistic resolutions, dissociating the concept from its basic connection to political discord. This body of literature tends to overlook the dynamics of collective confrontation, instead focusing on the aggregate configurations of individual characteristics.

In the realm of political science, students of U.S. politics have reinvigorated the notion against a backdrop of escalating concerns regarding heightened rhetoric, acrimony, and lack of civility within political discourse, particularly in the aftermath of the 1994 aggressive campaigning spearheaded by Republican figure Newt Gingrich⁷. Subsequently, polarization has emerged as a prevalent and enduring issue within the United States, with its presence persisting and intensifying despite subsequent developments. On the contrary, its importance has only amplified, notably with the emergence of the Tea Party movement, the steadfast obstructionism exhibited by Republicans during President Obama's tenure, and the contentious presidency of Donald Trump. This trajectory reached a zenith with Trump's refusal to concede defeat in the 2020 elections and the violent insurrection on January 6, 2021, targeting the U.S. Congress.

Political polarization represents a significant political challenge of our time. While it stems from numerous sources, a critical cause is the distortion of governmental structure. This structure, which once necessitated consensus to implement major policy changes, now allows the President to enact such changes unilaterally. Since the President represents the median of their party rather than that of the nation, presidential decisions tend to be more extreme than those that would emerge from Congress, especially when the legislative houses and the President are typically divided along party lines. Domestically, Congress's delegation of policy decisions to the executive branch enables the President's administration to establish key regulations governing economic and social life⁸. This often results in relatively extreme regulations that can shift dramatically between administrations of different parties, thereby fostering polarization and undermining efforts to achieve political consensus. In the realm of foreign affairs, the President's authority to engage in military interventions and to negotiate substantial international agreements independently further circumvents the need for compromise and consensus-building.

Understanding the institutional roots of polarization offers a roadmap for legal reforms aimed at restoring a constitution based on compromise. To achieve this, excessive delegation of authority should be curtailed, compelling Congress to make crucial decisions. Additionally, the President's power to initiate hostilities and enter into executive agreements should be constrained by requiring prior congressional authorization or swift ratification by Congress afterward⁹. These reforms do not necessitate reinventing the system but rather a return to

⁷ Mann, T. E., & Ornstein, N. J. (2012). *It's Even Worse than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*. New York: Basic Books.

⁸ Farina, C. R. (2015). Congressional polarization: Terminal constitutional dysfunction? *Columbia Law Review*, 115(7), 1689-1693.

⁹ Kilgore, E. (2019, July 23). Trump is achieving peak polarization. *N.Y. Mag.: Intelligencer*.
<http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/07/trump-is-achieving-peak-polarization.html>

established constitutional structures. In a political environment where compromise is routinely required, citizens would likely become less polarized, perceiving each other less as adversaries or threats and more as partners in a shared civic enterprise.

The expansion of presidential administrative powers heightens the stakes of presidential elections, instilling a fear in each side that the opposing party will wield considerable and largely unchecked authority across various policy domains. This decline in legislative compromise serves as a catalyst for polarization and division. While compromises may lead to some dissatisfaction, the implementation of extreme policies with which individuals strongly disagree generates anger, further alienating them from their wholly triumphant adversaries. Consequently, presidential contests become more contentious, and the political climate transforms into a perpetual campaign, with the losing party immediately mobilizing to secure victory in the subsequent election¹⁰.

Presidents have also appropriated unilateral authority in matters of war and foreign affairs. Since World War II, Presidents have engaged in offensive military actions without congressional authorization, exemplified by President George H.W. Bush's invasion of Panama. President Barack Obama entered into the significant international Paris Accord on Climate Change without securing the requisite two-thirds Senate approval or majority support in Congress¹¹, thereby bypassing both the treaty ratification process and the alternative of a congressional-executive agreement. Subsequently, President Trump withdrew from the accord, and President Biden reentered it, all based on their own executive authority¹².

These actions exacerbate polarization. The unilateral authority vested in the President enables significant military operations or international agreements to proceed without consensus, rendering them prone to political controversy. Additionally, when the President unilaterally takes action, it becomes easier for members of Congress to criticize it compared to if they had approved it through a vote. In contrast, when Congress sanctions a military operation, its members face greater difficulty in finding fault with it at the first sign of trouble. Consequently, this reduces the likelihood of a military operation becoming a target for partisan attacks, allowing it to garner broader support and promote national unity. Similarly, executive agreements made without congressional approval are inherently unstable and susceptible to sudden shifts in partisan attitudes, leading to inconsistency and potential partisan backlash.

Political scientists delineate between elite and mass polarization. Elite polarization pertains to polarization among societal leaders, including legislators, administrators, judges, and opinion influencers¹³. Mass polarization, on the other hand, refers to polarization among ordinary citizens. These forms of polarization mutually reinforce each other, with elite

¹⁰ 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), 16-24.

¹¹ Stonedale, J. (2016, April 18). President Obama's signing of the Paris Agreement is only good for nine months. *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/energy-environment/276668-president-obamas-signing-of-the-paris-agreement-is>

¹² White House. (2017, June 1). President Trump announces U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord. *The White House*. Retrieved from <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/president-trump-announces-u-s-withdrawal-paris-climate-accord/>

¹³ McCarty, N. (2019). *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press. pp. 13.

polarization often leading to mass polarization as elites disparage each other in front of a broad audience¹⁴.

While research on this topic is extensive, recent developments within the American governmental system suggest a concerning trend wherein these institutions increasingly find themselves in conflict, posing a constitutional challenge to the delicate balance of power. Over time, the executive branch has incrementally assumed constitutional powers, authority, and privileges that are ideally within the purview of Congress, both directly and indirectly. This argument underscores how the erosion of the separation of powers has rendered the government less democratic, more authoritarian, and less equipped to address intricate challenges necessitating diverse perspectives and careful deliberation. Furthermore, the escalating polarization between political parties has exacerbated this issue, fostering a hostile environment not only within government but also among the general populace. Consequently, the concentration of power in the presidency is exacerbated as citizens gravitate towards leaders who may undermine democratic norms and institutions.

The phenomenon of political polarization in the United States represents both a reflection of and a catalyst for democratic fragility. Its persistence has eroded institutional legitimacy, diminished citizens' trust, and weakened the capacity of the political system to govern through consensus. The study demonstrates that polarization is not merely the result of ideological divergence but also of structural imbalances—particularly the concentration of power in the executive branch and the legislative gridlock that ensues. These institutional distortions amplify partisan animosity and heighten the stakes of political competition, transforming democratic disagreement into existential conflict.

Reversing this trajectory requires more than appeals to civility; it demands constitutional and procedural reforms that reassert Congress's deliberative role, limit unilateral executive action, and incentivize cross-party negotiation. Curbing excessive presidential authority in both domestic and foreign policy would restore the principle of shared governance, making compromise once again a functional necessity rather than a political liability. Moreover, fostering civic education, media literacy, and pluralistic dialogue can help bridge the psychological and informational divides that sustain affective polarization.

Ultimately, addressing polarization entails rebuilding both the institutional foundations and the moral imagination of American democracy. By restoring mechanisms of accountability, promoting shared civic identity, and institutionalizing compromise, the United States can mitigate the corrosive effects of polarization and reaffirm its democratic resilience in a period of global uncertainty.

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¹⁴ Jacobson, G. C. (2000). Party polarization in national politics: The electoral connection. In J. R. Bond & R. Fleisher (Eds.), Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era pp. 9-26.

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