

**Polarization:  
A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenge to Global  
Democracy**

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to identify the issue of political polarization as it relates not only to American politics, but also to see how the issues in political polarization that exist in the United States are also experienced in other democracies around the world. The paper takes a look at what some of the different theories are about where polarization originates, who some of the leading scholars are in the debate over polarization, what institutional mechanisms contribute to the problem of polarization, and then finally what polarization looks like elsewhere in the world.*

*When it comes to the current American debate on how polarization originates there are three distinctive camps on the idea. One argues that polarization is organic, meaning that it derives from the masses and is represented proportionally at the elite level of politics. Another argues that polarization is illusory, and that the electorate is sorted ideologically by political elites, institutional mechanisms, and the media. The third camp argues that the origins of polarization are more complex than simply either organic or illusory. The findings of this study indicate that the third camp is better suited for addressing the issue of polarization in a historical sense.*

*Another finding from this study is that the issue of political polarization in the United States is not unique to the global stage. Democracies around the world are suffering from a new era of polarizing politics that all have separate origins but similar patterns. Overall, a revitalization of democratic institutions with regard to social justice, electorate systems, representation, campaign finance, and proportional representation is a true and important challenge for the future of democracy.*

## Introduction

Democracy is being tested. Political polarization in the United States has been increasing since the 1960's and now the political divide rests on deepening issues of race, culture, and geography (McRainey, 2018). It is coming to a point where the argument between left and right has taken new meaning. American politics have evolved to encompass distinctive sociocultural identities and, as a result, violence has occurred and blood has been drawn. The threat of polarization is clear and present because it creates alignment along “multiple lines of potential conflict and organizes individuals and groups around exclusive identities, thus crystalizing interests into opposite factions” (Baldassarri/Gelman, 2008). Besides specific events, such as the unfortunate and unnerving insurrection on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, political polarization brings real government work to a halt. “The division between congressional Democrats and Republicans has arguably caused the economy to stagnate, both in the United States and globally, and poses substantial barriers to enacting bipartisan policies that address the major economic, environmental, and social challenges of our time” (Westfall et al, 2015). This is a dilemma that needs to be addressed in order to revitalize and strengthen democracy.

There is agreement amongst historians and political scientists that there has always been polarization in politics. An example of this historical extent is the fact that congressmen have been shot and beaten for arguments in the past. One can look into beating of Charles Sumner in 1856 (and the subsequent Civil War) to see how polarization has already plagued our democracy. Decisive disagreements in politics are certainly not new. However, what we are seeing now is polarization that is taken to a new level. The modern-day challenges that require government solutions are new, divisive, and specific to our age. Hot issues, such as climate change, for

example, pose serious questions that seemingly create such opposition to the effect that constituents are questioning not the approach, but the reality of the issues.

## **Divided Politics, Divided Ideas**

A good place to start is to ask ourselves, where is it coming from? On face value this would seemingly be an easy question to address, making the assumption that all you have to do is look at the facts, but the real truth is that political scientists are almost as polarized in their answer to polarization as the political elites and the electorate seemingly are themselves. In this analysis of polarization there are essentially three camps. In the first camp you have political scientists that argue political polarization is a reflection and causation of the sentiment amongst the American electorate. This camp developed in response to claims made by Morris Fiorina in 2004. Chief among these theorists is Alan Abramowitz who started with his book *The Disappearing Center* in 2011. This bottom-up theory reflects representative democracy as we would like to see it. The political elites carry out the politics based on their constituency and thus any polarization reflects the ideology of the masses.

The second camp in this argument states just the opposite. These theories argue that polarization isn't as prominent in the electorate as it may appear. This "illusory polarization", they argue, is a result of political elites, media, and special interest groups that benefit from skewing reality. The primary figurehead in this camp is Morris Fiorina. His book, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* published in 2004 sought to dispel the sensationalist journalism that portrayed a deeply divided America. "He argued that a newly polarized political class was strikingly out of sync with a mostly moderate citizenry not much more divided than they were a generation ago" (Mann, 2009).

The third camp, with regard to polarization theories, rests in much older analysis and arguments about the electorate. This theory sort of pulls people like Philip Converse into the fray and seeks to interpret his original data differently. Essentially the third camp is in agreement with the second camp, but focuses more heavily on the ignorance of the public. Rather than saying that the elites, media, and interests groups are solely responsible for polarization they are showing evidence for an electorate which is increasingly disinterested and removed from the political process. Converse explains this idea best in what he calls “rational ignorance”. He writes,

“the world is large, information about it seems infinite, and even the most capacious minds must stringently limit their acquisition of information to matters that interest them either in the abstract or, more centrally, that they find otherwise useful to have on hand. Beyond this point, information costs are not worth paying, and ignorance is rational” (Converse, 2006).

These three ideas all agree on one aspect, that American politics is polarized at an alarming rate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They vehemently disagree on where it comes from. It would seem rational to think that the polarization is real amongst constituents when you look at a map of presidential elections in the last 20 years. A sea of red with heavily populated islands of blue hints to a strong geographically based ideological divide amongst the American people. However, when you overlay those results with congressional, state, and local elections the country is more purple and the story is less easy to explain. Each camp closely analyzes National Election Surveys in their own way and one of the major arguments between camps is in what exactly that data says.

## *Polarization Is Organic*

In 2008, Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders published an article in response to claims of polarization as a myth by Fiorina et al. In this article they immediately grab Converse and pull his ideas into their argument in showing that, yes, Americans had a “very limited understanding of basic ideological concepts such as liberalism and conservatism”, but that the American electorate has “changed dramatically since the 1950s in ways that might lead one to expect an increase in the prevalence of ideological thinking in the public” (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). They demonstrate how education in politics has increased since the 1950’s resulting in higher political efficacy amongst the majority of Americans. Abramowitz and Saunders cite other social scientists such as Demerath, Evans, Nunn, Klinkner, Hapanowicz, and Rosenthal that have conducted research in this area, all in the mid 2000’s. They state, “a growing body of research indicates that political and cultural divisions within the American public have deepened considerably since the 1970s” (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). Their main argument rests in this idea that ideological polarization amongst the electorate is like the soil that produces the crops of political elites. They state, “Divisions that exist among policymakers in Washington reflect real divisions among the American people” (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). This claim was reinforced in 2015 by Westfall et al. when they showed how “those who perceive the greatest political attitude polarization in the United States – and, hence, those who most exaggerate political polarization – are those who are themselves most polarized, strongly identifying as party members and holding relatively extreme attitudes that align with their partisan identities”. And they go on to ask the question, “What are the consequences for a healthy democracy when those who are most engaged are most inclined to

exaggerate political polarization?” (Westfall et al, 2015). This, they believe, is that the polarized elites are born from that sentiment.

### *Polarization Is Artificial*

These ideas and analysis of the Abramowitz camp sounds convincing and certainly falls into our perception of how representative democracy should work. However, the theorists of the second camp provide equally appealing analysis and arrive at an alternative conclusion. In 2008 Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope presented a direct response to the criticism from Abramowitz and Saunders. They state, “Abramowitz and Saunders contend that the electorate as a whole is less moderate than we believe and that partisans are far more deeply polarized than we believe. If one examines the data without resort to multiple recodings and aggregations, their case disappears” (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2008). So perhaps the NES data is not being interpreted properly. Also in 2008 Baldassarri and Gelman reaffirmed the opinion of Fiorina et al. when they said, “increased issue partisanship is not due to higher ideological coherence...it mostly arose from parties’ being more polarized and therefore doing a better job at sorting individuals along ideological lines” (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Based on this statement we can conclude that most voters assess a candidates position and then align themselves with the candidate whom they support. The elites are sorting the electorate from the top down. It would then seem that the people choose the team they like best and then vehemently argue in favor of their chosen one. A reasonable analogy could be a football game, the fans align themselves with the teams. To what extent are the fans capable of determining the success of their team? Another person in the artificial polarization camp that takes a look at this kind of question is Robert Shapiro. He echoes concerns originally stated by James Madison when he asks the question, “to what extent should the public be permitted to influence what governments do,

rather than leaving governance to political leaders and other elites?” (Shapiro, 1998). So part of what this camp argues is not so much rooted in the cause of polarization, but also the question of whether it is even advisable for the electorate to influence the spectrum alignment of their chosen parties.

### *A Disengaged Public*

So, on the one hand we have political scientists arguing that the people align themselves according to the polarization that is apparent among the elites and represented in media. On the other hand there are political scientists stating the opposite, that political leaders simply frame their agenda based solely on their constituency’s alignment...true representation. However it is important to look at some of the original writing on this topic as originally discussed by Philip Converse. The camp which demonstrates a disengaged public emerges as interpreting the data in less simplistic terms. In 2006 Converse comes out and explains that he has been misread by these two camps which cite his work so much. He says, “I have found it very hard to understand this misreading about few in the electorate holding any “real” policy attitudes. It is almost as though the misreader believes our argument to be that citizens must be either full ideologues or near to it...or else that they have no “real” policy attitudes” (Converse, 2006). The electorate is not simply red and blue, nor is it gray. There is a middle ground that gives us perhaps the best glimpse of the answer to our question about polarization. Corwin Smidt published an article in 2017 called *Polarization and the Decline of the American floating Voter*. In this he echoes Converse’s concern of generalization. He talks about how there is evidence of less switching between parties in successive elections, proof of mass polarization. He then leans towards the second camp in his ideas of where it comes from and writes, “the decline in switching appears to be in response to polarized parties. But to claim it is simply caused by elites is an

oversimplification” (Smidt, 2017). It would be nice to say that either the American public is ideologically polarized, or to say that the elites are polarized causing an illusory polarization amongst the electorate. But to do so ignores a reality that political opinion is much more complex.

### *Where Are We Now*

Some of the relevant literature, investigations, and analyses on this topic goes back to the 1950’s and 1960’s. The fact that polarization has increased since then is not disputed. Based on the events of the last four years, culminating in an attempted insurrection, shows that we are perhaps at the nadir of polarized politics, short of politics continued by other means. Much of the writing that focuses on this phenomenon is based on the presidential election of 2008 and the mid-term elections of 2010. Political Scientists are currently working on trying to explain the Trump Presidency and the kind of polarization that created. There are a lot of new studies currently underway. It is clear that the media, interest groups, and the political elites are not blameless in the intense polarization that has occurred. Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer explained in 2018 that polarization, “advantages actors willing and able to employ unyielding, exclusionary, and demagogic politics and rhetoric” (McCoy, Somer, 2018). These tactics are plain to see in many democracies of our age.

## **Discussion**

So, if polarization is clear and present in our democracy, and differences are increasingly aligning along singular dimensions, becoming more “us” versus “them”, what do we do about it? In order to answer that question, we need a better understanding of the mechanisms, dynamics, and institutionalized factors which perpetuate a broken system. Addressing the complexity of the issue will perhaps provide the complex solution.

While there is evidence of political elites fomenting polarization among the American populace (see the Trump presidency), a historical analysis of American politics also demonstrates how sociocultural revolutions have their origins amongst the electorate thereby shaping the longer-term political landscape. This idea partially reinforces Abramowitz's ideas from the first camp. For example, in an interview with The Emory Report he says,

“The political divisions of today first begin to take shape in the 1960's and 1970's as America experienced a seismic shift in culture and race relations. In those days, the Democratic Party base included the unionized, working class people in the North and white Southerners. But as American society changed rapidly (thanks in large part to gains in the civil rights and women's rights movements), parties have arranged themselves in a very different configuration as those who resent the changes have become increasingly Republican and those who benefit from and approve of the changes have becoming increasingly Democratic”  
(McRaine, 2018)

This sociocultural shift in America demonstrates how popular movements, both for and against Civil Rights, have translated into a deeply divided two party system which now sets the tone for illusory polarization amongst the electorate. Political elites took their cues from their constituents and transformed the American Government into a polarization machine. For example, “the rise of Newt Gingrich and the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives in 1994 brought about a scorched-earth approach to political opposition” (Kornacki, 2018). So, in a way, the first camp is correct. That is, until a certain point. From the 1960's onward the political elite and institutions surrounding them continued to become increasingly divided to the current situation, where the intense division seems almost automated.

## **Polarization Inherent in the System**

During the Obama and the Trump presidencies we have been able to see how polarized politics are simply becoming the modus operandi of government systems. The drivers of political polarization are now fully institutionalized whether the electorate mirrors that system or not. One of these mechanisms is the two-party system itself. “The use of first-past-the-post voting for virtually all legislative seats...make it difficult for third parties to gain any sort of real national viability or broader political traction” (Carothers, O’Donohue, 2019). If it is two parties which threaten to tear our democracy apart then it would seem viable that third parties could be the key to balancing partisanship throughout governments. However, various types of proportional representation are rare in American electoral systems. During the 2020 elections, voters that supported third party candidates were frequently frustrated with the idea that a third-party vote would be a “wasted vote” and could be a potential gain for their two-party opposition candidate. This winner-take-all system essentially means that no other party would be able to realistically challenge the two main parties, no matter how unpopular the two parties become.

Another major polarizing institutional factor is the role of money in political campaigns combined with the lack of transparency which masquerades as being protected by first amendment rights. For example, “wealthy individuals who are highly motivated to fund explicitly partisan political agendas have taken advantage of the effective elimination of limits on political contributions to funnel vast sums of money into political causes that they champion” (Carothers, O’Donohue, 2019). Large, anonymous, sums of money keep political polarization within the elite ranks by propelling those candidates who are supported by elite entities. In addition, it is those extreme causes, which lack a majority of (moderate) votes that become overrepresented by disproportionate campaign finance schemes.

A third institutionalized factor of polarization is the system of partisan gerrymandering. In this scheme, legislative districts are mapped with the sole purpose of gaining more favorable constituents, with no basis in geographical sense. This kind of mapping reflects the second camp's theories because districts appear to show polarization amongst the electorate, when in reality it is the district boundaries themselves which are specifically manipulated to favor this kind of data. Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman reflect on how this represents Morris Fiorina's theories in their article *Partisans Without Constraint*. They state, "increased issue partisanship is not due to higher ideological coherence; rather, as suggested by Fiorina et al. (2005), it mostly arose from parties' being more polarized and therefore doing a better job at sorting individuals along ideological lines" (Baldassarri, Gelman, 2008). In the case of gerrymandering, they are very much geographically doing that sorting. Urban centers are reflected as blue and rural communities reflect vast sections of red on political maps. This gives the impression that all city dwellers are liberal progressives in opposition to the so called culturally conservative farmer. So, we see an illusion of geographical sorting that begins to mesh with ideological polarization. It is plain to see that kind of mapping misrepresents the electorate and is instead a falsely prescribed elite narrative which contributes to ideological polarization within the constituency. A good example of this phenomenon is to look at the demographics of the people who have been charged with storming the US Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>. A University of Chicago Political Scientist, Robert Pape, put together statistics on the rioters and concluded something that one might not expect based on political geographic sorting data. "The 377 people [that were charged as of 7 April 2021] did not come from pro-Trump counties. In fact, the majority of them came from blue counties that [Joe] Biden won comfortably" (Pape,

2021). Gerrymandering and districting in general puts us into a situation where the first-past-the-post system grossly misrepresents the electorate and contributes to polarization.

A final consideration to institutionalized polarization involves an analysis of how communication technology has shaped our lives. As President Trump repeatedly mentioned before, during, and after his presidency, the media is very much responsible for shaping our views. This is perhaps one statement in which there is actually some validity in his bellicose political language. The information landscape is very much different today than it was pre-1960. Prior to this age, before cable television, media consisted of a small number of national broadcasters that were speaking to the American People as a whole group. Now, the internet provides a reduced common information space and creates a breeding ground for radical theories which are selectively adhered to. The previously mentioned political elite specifically, and rather hypocritically, took advantage of social media platforms to “spread disinformation intended to confuse and distort information about real events” (Carothers, O’Donohue, 2019). Media is a part of the machine, whether it is a conscious subversion or an unintended side effect of expanding communication technology.

Whether you agree with the first, second, or third camp, one thing is clear. Polarization, or more specifically, what Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer call “pernicious polarization”, is present in our democracy, and it is eroding those democratic values which make it something worth defending. Be it born from the masses, or an illusion created by elites, in its simple form it is, “a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘us’ versus ‘them’”(McCoy, Somer, 2018). This kind of severity really ignores the chicken or the egg debate. Rather it demonstrates how both

elite and mass polarization become fused together in one massive democratic breakdown. So, if we take a step back from the three camps, discussed earlier, we can notice something that is truly alarming. This issue is not simply an American issue. “Pernicious polarization” is a pandemic that is dividing democracies across the globe.

## **A Global Phenomenon**

No matter where you look, polarization has the same effect on democracy. “It routinely weakens respect for democratic norms, corrodes basic legislative processes, undermines the nonpartisan stature of the judiciary, and fuels public disaffection with political parties” (Carothers, O’Donohue, 2019). For example, Columbia is one democracy which has been plagued by polarization which specifically contributed to waves of violence and extremism.

Since the devastating civil war, La Violencia, in the 1940s and 1950s the countries government created a power sharing agreement that was a two-party system which specifically excluded third parties and far leftist Marxist regimes. The exclusion of these parties led to the creation of several paramilitary groups that had few more choices than violence and drug financing to defend their political interests and ideologies. McCoy and Somer explain this dynamic very well. They state:

“Perceiving an existential threat from an authoritarian government in a polarized atmosphere, for example, opposition groups may reflexively focus on the ‘urgent need’ for removing the government rather than on developing a positive agenda. This may reinforce polarization as progovernment groups charge the opposition with ‘attacking’ the government but offering no alternative program” (McCoy, Somer, 2018)

Each new Columbian president brought with them a different polar opposite program for dealing with these groups. In 2016, the people of Columbia managed to create a Peace Accord between the government and one of the largest groups called FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia). Unfortunately, over the last three years, serious polarization has eroded trust in the government and undermined the validity of the accord. This is just one other country plagued by this problem. Latin America has seen increasing cases of polarization which damages systems of democracy in Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru (Levitsky, 2018).

On the other side of the world, in Turkey, the divide between secularists and Islamists has put Turkey into a dangerous position with opposing factions that have become violent in other middle eastern countries. The leadership of President Erdogan, since 2002, has been heavily partisan, utilizing almost authoritarian tactics. The most comprehensive and recent study of polarization in Turkey has found that “the level of political polarization in Turkey has reached a level that should alarm even optimists” (Erdogan, 2016). As we have seen in the last four decades, destabilization in Middle Eastern and African countries represent a threat to world peace.

In Africa we can see an example of democratic polarization in many countries. In Kenya two ethnic groups, the Kikuyu and Luo, have experienced divisions created by elite entrepreneurs, political centralization, and economic inequalities which contribute to the collapse of democratic institutions. “Although the momentum for democratization globally in the 1990s promised the building of participatory and representative institutions that would mitigate polarization, the resurgence of new and old political fissures has raised profound questions about the solidity of these processes” (Carothers, O’Donohue, 2019).

The cases go on and on; India, Poland, and Bangladesh are just to name a few more clear examples of divided democracies. It is a diverse set of countries, with strikingly similar political problems. Political analysts are only just beginning to understand the true spread of this problem. Most of the information related to global issues with polarization are only five years old at the most. In a way, social media stands as a symbol of this growing and complex problem. Its ability to expand extreme ideologies and contain those thoughts within an intolerant bubble of likeminded individuals is a good analogy for what is happening to political parties around the world. It is something that threatens many democracies and requires detailed studies to fully understand the problem and especially to understand which efforts to mitigate the problem are the most effective.

## **Conclusion**

Is this the end? Does a political polarization pandemic spell the end of democracies around the world? Will we see a rise in authoritarian regimes and global events reminiscent of 1939? Not necessarily. “Polarization can (and historically does) facilitate party building and constituency mobilization and stabilization, simplify choices for voters, and help consolidate political party systems” (McCoy, Somer, 2018). It is no doubt a serious problem that stands as an omen of what can happen if measures are not taken to address the growing sociocultural rift. But, as McCoy states, “Polarization is a double edge sword”. The survival of democracy depends on the ability of global, national, and local leadership energizing the revitalization of democratic institutions, new social contracts, and new accountability mechanisms.

Efforts to counteract the problem are underway. It is a part of democratic structure to allow for renovation and it is this feature which provides for the freedom to creatively counteract polarization. It all begins with leadership. People who can influence their constituency to come

together on issues will help to reinforce communication across the aisle. Once dialogue can begin then institutional reforms can be discussed. Efforts should aim for, “relevant institutions reforms, especially relating to the electoral system and the degree of centralization of political power” (Carothers, O’Donohue, 2019). An example of one of these electoral systems is the idea of ranked choice voting. It has been made clear that first-past-the-post systems are partly responsible for the perpetuation of polarization if not the origin. However, this idea is also debatable, especially if we adhere to the ideas of Philip Converse and the ignorant voter.

Some reforms in media are already underway. Each social media company is well aware by now of their role in disinformation campaigns. Companies such as Facebook and Twitter, just to name two, have actively placed counter measures against a wave of false information that contributed to controversy during the 2020 elections. “Various initiatives have sought to combat disinformation, block extremist voices, and reduce the built-in tendency of some social media to amplify the extremes” (Carothers, O’Donohue, 2019).

There is still much work to be done. Political scientists are still working to fully understand each facet of polarization. The more that we can understand, the better that we can work together to reverse polarization and help carry democracy into a new age, worldwide.

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