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Polarization in America: two possible futures

Gordon Heltzel and Kristin Laurin

The rise of polarization over the past 25 years has many Americans worried about the state of politics. This worry is understandable: up to a point, polarization can help democracies, but when it becomes too vast, such that entire swaths of the population refuse to consider each other's views, this thwarts democratic methods for solving societal problems. Given widespread polarization in America, what lies ahead? We describe two possible futures, each based on different sets of theory and evidence. On one hand, polarization may be on a self-reinforcing upward trajectory fueled by misperception and avoidance; on the other hand it may have recently reached the apex of its pendulum swing. We conclude that it is too early to know which future we are approaching, but that our ability to address misperceptions may be one key factor.

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Recall the last time you heard a news story about political foes disrespecting and ignoring each other. Now recall the last time you heard a news story about political foes respectfully listening to each other. Many Americans find the latter increasingly difficult, as news stories document the negative effects of rising political polarization in recent decades [1]. As polarization has risen, so have Americans' worries: 90% believe their country is divided over politics and 60% feel pessimistic about their country overcoming these divisions to solve its biggest problems [2,3]. What does the future hold? We argue that, at its current level, polarization threatens the stability of American democracy [4^{*}], then offer two alternative predictions for its trajectory.

Current polarization

Political polarization occurs when subsets of a population adopt increasingly dissimilar attitudes toward parties and party members (i.e., affective polarization; [5^{*}]), as well as

ideologies and policies (ideological polarization; [6]).¹ With little-to-no polarization, most people support a mixture of liberal and conservative stances across issues, and they can support one party without disliking others. With very high polarization, large, separate clusters of the population endorse ideologically consistent stances across all issues, and love their own party while loathing the other(s).

Polarization recently reached an all-time high in the US [7]. In the last half century, members of both parties have reported increasingly extreme ideological views [8], a trend more pronounced among Republicans than Democrats, especially in the last decade [9–11]. More than ever, Americans endorse their party's stance across all issues [7]. Since the 1990s, Americans' liking for their own party and dislike for opponents have both increased [5^{*},12]. For example, 80% of Americans today feel unfavorable towards their partisan foes, and the portion feeling *very* unfavorable has nearly tripled since 1994 [13]. These trends have led scholars to speculate that politics is a unique intergroup domain wherein people's hate for opponents exceeds their affinity for co-partisans [12,14].

Polarization and democracy

Does polarization help or hurt democracies?

Political scientists continue to debate the costs and benefits of polarization. At its best, polarization can be benign, and produce more effective, stable democracies. It encourages civic engagement: Polarized citizens more often vote, protest, and join political movements, all of which are necessary for functioning democracy [15] and help disrupt undesirable status quos [16]. Polarization also entails pluralistic policy alternatives [17]; this is crucial for democracies, which rely on citizens being able to consider multiple policies and have thorough, constructive debates between them [18]. Ideally, this kind of engagement and pluralism ultimately produce effective, stable government: It helps societies identify policies that are both optimal for solving their biggest problems [89], and unlikely to be overturned when a new party takes power since they are mutually agreed-upon [85].

¹ Polarization occurs everywhere to varying degrees, among both citizens and elected officials. We focus on polarization among American citizens (for elite polarization, see Refs. [86,44]) because of the wealth of empirical studies examining this population over time. With American polarization at record highs, the prevalence and effects described here are likely milder elsewhere; moreover, unique political and cultural factors (e.g., multi-party systems, democratic versus other political systems, media availability) likely influence how polarization manifests [87,88,94].

At its worst, polarization is pernicious, posing a challenge to the democratic process [4^{*}]. Highly polarized citizens often refuse to engage with each other, reactively dismissing out of hand both potential flaws in their own views and potential merits of their other opponents' [16,19]. Under these conditions, constructive debates are impossible and mutually acceptable policies elusive.

Of course, people might feel morally compelled to polarize, even to this pernicious degree. For example, if one half of a society begins to embrace morally abhorrent ideas (i.e., white supremacy; Neo-Nazi ideologies), the other half might be justified in polarizing away from them, refusing to engage with or consider their views. A full philosophical discussion of the morality of polarization falls beyond the scope of this paper (see Refs. [20–22]). Nonetheless, in a world where one half of a population refuse to engage with the other, even if this is the most morally correct choice, democratic processes can no longer operate effectively [23,24]. The only policies considered are those loved by one party and despised by the other; one side eventually ekes out a narrow victory, leaving the other desperate to delegitimize it [25]. In short, when polarization inspires revulsion, democracies run the risk of breaking down.

Is contemporary polarization helping or hurting American democracy?

Recent research in psychology has primarily highlighted the negative consequences of polarization in America. Americans accept smaller paychecks to avoid listening to opposing partisans [26^{*}], move to new places to surround themselves with ideologically similar residents [27], and swipe left on people with whom they disagree politically [28]. Polarized Americans are more willing to exclude people with opposing political beliefs than to exclude people of other races [29,30]—a jarring comparison considering the prevalence of race-based exclusion [31].

Likewise, Americans have trouble critically evaluating the flaws and merits of policies [32]. Instead, they seek information that confirms their partisan preferences [91] and disregard facts that counter them [33,34]. Out of loyalty [35], they treat core party issues as immune to debate [19,36,37] and suppress their opponents' views [38–40].

In short, recent psychological findings suggest that Americans are refusing to interact with politically dissimilar others [19], and are motivated to overlook both the inadequacies in policies they support and the merits of opposing policies. Even if they feel—even if they *are*—morally justified in both avoiding opponents and their beliefs while doubling down on their own, this carries pragmatic risks [41]. In a system where the two polarized parties represent sizeable portions of the population, democratic processes may lead to suboptimal, oft-overturned policies that inadequately address societal problems [25].

Future polarization

Given the current state of polarization, what lies ahead for America? Extant theorizing leads us to consider two alternative futures.

Possible future #1: polarization is a self-reinforcing cycle that will continue to increase

Polarization may be bound to increase, owing to a self-reinforcing cycle. This cycle could take many forms (e.g., [42,43]), one of which is described in this very issue [44]. Drawing from these sources, we briefly review evidence that Americans overperceive polarization then reactively distance themselves from opponents, thereby increasing actual polarization; from here, they will again overperceive this now-elevated polarization, creating a self-perpetuating upward spiral.

Americans overestimate the extremity of both their opponents' and co-partisans' views [45,46], to the point where they perceive partisan opinion gaps to be twice their true size [47]. They also perceive vast partisan differences in moral values [48], even though both liberals and conservatives endorse similar core moral values (i.e., care, fairness; [49]) and disavow harm to others [50].

There are at least three sources contributing to these overestimates. First, biased polling measures may be inviting evidence for polarization with division-inciting questions [51]. For example, Republicans report more polarized attitudes toward 'the *opposing* party' than 'the *Democratic* Party' [52], and divisive policy terms increase partisan opinion discrepancies (e.g., 'global warming' versus 'climate change'; [53]).

Second, though fewer than 10% of Americans identify as extremely liberal or conservative [7], this minority pervades political discourse: News stories cover their views more often [54,55], they are twice as likely to post about politics on social media [1], and because they use negative, angry language to morally condemn opponents [56], their messages are more likely to spread through social networks [57,58^{*}]. This disproportionately vocal minority may skew people's perceptions of the modal views on each side.

Third, the psychological weight of bad news leads Americans to overestimate polarization [59]. Negative political content (e.g., stories of disrespect and close-mindedness, distressing poll results, extremists' messages) grabs attention, dwells in memory, and colors our impressions of politics more than equally positive content [60].

Compounding these three processes, routinely exaggerated political polarization likely engenders a self-perpetuating cycle. When citizens overestimate polarization, they often dislike and avoid their opponents [61^{*},62], which can, in turn, increase actual polarization: Disliking opponents may cause people to adopt preferences even further from those

of the opponents [63], and avoiding opponents creates political echo chambers (especially among conservatives; [64,90]) that reinforce partisans' pre-existing views. Likewise, when partisans overestimate how much they are hated by their opponents, they feel licensed to hate their opponents more in response [95]. Thus, people tend to overestimate polarization, which leads them to gradually shift further and further away from who they perceive their opponents to be.

Possible future #2: polarization is a pendulum that has reached its apex

Alternatively, though, polarization may have reached its peak, owing to Americans' growing resentment for polarization and its consequences. Their resentment has grown for two reasons. First (and most directly), polarization leads to more extreme policy alternatives [17], which Americans find unappealing, even when they come from their own party [65].

Second (and more indirectly), Americans disapprove of polarization's consequences. They feel that the quality of political discussion has deteriorated, featuring too many insults and not enough factual debate [3,5^{*}], and they are embarrassed about their current politicians' antagonistic behavior [3,66]. Rather than applauding party representatives who berate opponents, they prefer civil, respectful political relations [67^{*},68]; this is especially true among liberals [69]. Likewise, they believe political closed-mindedness is unintelligent and morally wrong [70,71], and reject co-partisans who refuse to consider opposing views [19,37], even socially excluding these dogmatic co-partisans [72^{*}].

When polarization leads fellow partisans to become disrespectful and close-minded, Americans respond by detaching from their parties and beliefs, resulting in weaker polarization. For example, upon seeing co-partisans disrespect opponents and ignore their views, Americans disidentify with their parties [1,73], instead moving toward more moderate positions [74^{*},75^{*}].

Which future is most likely?

Existing empirical findings provide mixed evidence as to which of the possible futures is in fact emerging. First, we consider evidence of polarization from public polls. On one hand, polls in the past decade show flat or even decreased rates of polarization. Despite 2016's contentious election, Americans showed no change in their preference for their own party over the opposing party between 2014 and 2017 [76^{*}]. Although dislike for political opponents increased sharply starting in 1994, since 2012 this trend has barely fluctuated [15]. Across four polls from 2011 to 2017, Pew gathered Democrats' and Republicans' attitudes on ten different issues; Partisans' attitudes have either converged or remained stable across five issues

(government business regulation; government waste; corporate profits; homosexuality; immigration; [13]).

On the other hand, partisans' attitudes have grown further apart across the other five issues (welfare; helping the needy; addressing inequalities for Black people; military strength; environmental policy; [13]). And although polarization remained stable before and after Trump's election, upcoming elections could highlight and exacerbate partisan divides. Moreover, infectious diseases typically evoke prejudice against groups whose norms oppose one's own [96], so the current COVID-19 pandemic could further exacerbate already high levels of affective polarization.

Turning to behavioral indicators of polarization, on one hand, despite concerns from scholars about sustained, record-high polarization [14], many consequences of polarization have not manifested. For example, Americans in 2017 were no more likely than Americans in 2014 to suppress unfavorable news about their party, to exclude political opponents, or to support criminal investigations of opposing politicians [76^{*}]. Likewise, even today's most fervent partisans would rather help their party than harm opponents [77]. For example, most partisans would rather allocate money to both co-partisans *and* opposing partisans than to co-partisans exclusively [78^{*}], and would rather publish favorable news about their own party than disparaging news about opponents [76^{*},79^{*}].

On the other hand, and more troublingly, polarization's most destructive consequences have worsened in recent years. For example, Americans' support for tear gassing counter-party protesters has risen since 2012 [76^{*}], and 5–15% of partisans support violence against political opponents [92]. Likewise, politically motivated hate crimes and aggression have increased recently, especially among the alt-right [93]. For example, after Trump's election in 2017, the United States witnessed ~1600 more hate crimes than its annual average [80].

Conclusion

Extant theory and evidence paint two different pictures of the future: Polarization may continue to rise in a self-perpetuating cycle, or it may have reached its peak and even begun its downward arc. In fact, both processes may be at work simultaneously. One key factor in determining which will win out may be whether political and media institutions are able combat misperceptions of polarization. To the extent they do so successfully, this might intercept polarization's self-perpetuating cycle, and help re-establish the existence of at least *some* common ground between the parties [46,61^{*},81–84].

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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