Mass Polarization and Democratic Decline: Global Evidence from a Half-Century of Public Opinion

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Abstract

An antagonistic political culture has long been thought to pose a threat to liberal democracy. More recently, many scholars have proposed a link between political polarization and democratic breakdown, yet causal evidence for this prominent theory remains thin. I present the first broadly comparative analysis of the relationship between mass polarization and democratic backsliding, the modal form of autocratic reversion in the post-third wave era. Panel estimates of ideological and affective polarization from as many as ninety countries and forty-nine years indicate that both ideological and affective polarization exert negligible causal effects on levels of electoral and liberal democracy. To the contrary, results suggest that democratic decline may actually foment mass polarization. Despite widespread concern over the fate of democracy in polarized polities, comparative evidence since the start of the third wave suggests that mass polarization itself poses little threat to democratic regimes.

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1 Introduction

Previously paradigmatic processes of autocratic reversion no longer characterize regime dynamics in the present-day. Outright military *coups d'état* (Linz 1978), *autogolpes* (Mauceri 1995), and blatant election fraud (Donno 2013) have declined in frequency since the late 1970s (Bermeo 2016), but democratic institutions are not everywhere on the rise. On the contrary, the third reverse wave of democratization foreshadowed by Huntington (1991) appears to be alive and well, characterized by gradual institutional degradation or power-grabs disguised beneath a veneer of legality (Conaghan 2008; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).[1]

Although "polarization" is the term currently in vogue, the idea that profound sociopolitical cleavages might lead to this democratic endangerment has long been a key tenet of the democracy literature. The potential for polarization to result in democratic backsliding appears particularly acute because the very divisions that become exacerbated in polarized polities are inherent within democracy itself (Lipset 1960; Rustow 1970). When times are good, these divisions may benefit political society by improving representation through strengthened party brands (Lupu 2013) and by encouraging greater government accountability (Bornschier 2019). When times are bad, however, these divisions can sow discord (Dahl 1971), prompt crises of governance (Linz 1978), and make party systems unresponsive to voters (Sartori 1976).

Decades of theory notwithstanding, how does polarization contribute to democratic backsliding? Numerous scholars have contributed to this high-profile theoretical assertion (e.g. Bermeo 2003; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Svolik 2019) and the literature is not lacking in case studies purporting to draw a causal arrow between the two phenomena (for syntheses of eleven such case studies, see McCoy and Somer 2019; Somer and McCoy 2019). What scholars are missing, however, is evidence from a systematic, comparative analysis showing that such a link exists in the first place.

[1] Cf. Levitsky and Way (2015).

The previous lack of such evidence is understandable, as the analysis required to produce it poses three major difficulties. First, polarization is a slippery concept, with myriad definitions and conceptualizations throughout the literature and measurements which often suffer from poor content validity (Lelkes 2016; Mehlhaff 2021). Second, the survey data necessary to estimate mass polarization is splintered across time, space, question wordings, and survey programs, frequently leaving scholars with only cross-sectional data or a small handful of data points for each case. Finally, most popular data sets of democracy are insufficient for capturing the slow, almost imperceptible decline characteristic of democratic backsliding. Taken together, these difficulties make causal inference quite problematic. I address each of them here.

The contributions of this paper are threefold. First, I estimate a causal effect of mass polarization on democracy by employing new panel estimates of ideological and affective polarization, estimated for as many as ninety countries over forty-nine years. Second, I argue theoretically and demonstrate empirically that scholars and pundits should exercise caution when promulgating the theory that polarization leads to democratic backsliding. Such a relationship is not supported by the evidence. Finally, I present results supporting the alternate theory that polarization may result from, not cause, crises of democracy. Whatever the cause of democratic backsliding, it is likely not mass polarization per se.

2 The Canonical Account of Polarization and Democracy

Political polarization in comparative perspective has enjoyed renewed attention over the last decade (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2021), but this phenomenon has long been closely tied to the study of democracy. Landmark studies of democratization and political institutionalization point to a contentious political climate as partially responsible for democratic breakdowns and troubled democratic transitions throughout the mid-

to late-twentieth century (Huntington 1968; Linz 1978; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). The basic theory is relatively straightforward: As normal politics regress into a state of antagonistic interpersonal or inter-party relations, the peaceful management of competing interests following mutually agreeable rules (Przeworski 1986) becomes increasingly difficult (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). In this type of political climate, "the polarization, the centrifugal drives, and the tendency toward irresponsibility and outbidding" place democratic regimes at risk (Linz 1978, p. 24). More recently, two research programs have congealed to build on this foundation with a specific eye toward democratic backsliding after the third wave of democratization, with one program focused on structural, macro-level patterns and another on behavioral, micro-level mechanisms.

The focus on macro-level evidence has produced a wellspring of case studies documenting the breakdown of democracy in polarized polities. These case studies span the globe, drawing evidence from Southeast Asia (Arugay and Slater 2019), Asia Minor (Somer 2019), the United States (Kaufman and Haggard 2019), Europe (Church and Vatter 2016), and Latin America (Hunter and Power 2019). Several syntheses sum up the bounty of evidence to argue that polarization, left unchecked, is almost deterministically detrimental to democracy (Lieberman et al. 2019; McCoy and Somer 2019; Somer and McCoy 2019). The proposed mechanisms, however, differ. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) provide perhaps the most high-profile warning. They posit a four-criterion "litmus test" of authoritarian behavior exhibited by democratically elected presidents—based mostly on Latin America and Eastern Europe—and argue that polarized party systems enable the rise of populist politicians who willingly dismantle democratic institutions and erode political norms. Pierson and Schickler (2020) emphasize the effect of polarization on meso-level institutions such as interest groups, state parties, and the media. Instead of acting as bulwarks against polarization and democratic decline, these institutions now reinforce those phenomena by tightly binding themselves to one party or the other and increasing the incentives for politicians to acquiesce to the extreme wing of their party (see also Roberts 2019).

Scholars studying polarization at the micro-level offer some insight into how mass polarization can feed into these political incentives and increase the likelihood of democratic decay. The working theory in this research program is that polarization encourages citizens to vote for more extreme or confrontational candidates (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Iyengar, Lelkes, et al. 2019), decreases their support for democratic norms (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Mason 2018), and erodes their dedication to accountability (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Svolik (2012; 2019) provides evidence for these hypotheses by leveraging a tension in democratic politics. He argues that voters are often presented with a tradeoff between upholding democracy and pursuing partisan goals, and that as polities become more polarized, individual voters' willingness to resolve this tradeoff at the expense of democracy increases. He demonstrates this experimentally in the United States (Graham and Svolik 2020) and Venezuela (Svolik 2020). Kingzette et al. (2021) focus on slightly different mechanisms. They contend that affective polarization generates cognitive biases which produce asymmetric democratic preferences; partisans oppose constitutional protections when their party is in power and support such measures when they are out of power (see also Finkel et al. 2020; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay forthcoming).

3 Reassessing Received Wisdom and Questioning Causal Direction

Though I necessarily present a simplified picture, the structural and behavioral insights cited above generally comprise the current state of knowledge regarding polarization and democratic backsliding. Both the academic community and popular press tend to interpret this wide-ranging evidence as political polarization leading to democratic decline. I urge caution in making such an interpretation. The bounty of case study evidence makes clear that mass polarization and democratic backsliding are very frequently observed together, and the two are certainly correlated. I object not to the assertion of correlation, but to the

causal attribution. I contend that polarization may actually impede democratic backsliding and that correlational evidence produced by most studies can be explained by a different causal story: that perceived or actual democratic crises instigate political polarization, not the reverse.

3.1 Polarization as an Impediment to Backsliding

Let us begin again at the macro-level by considering the electoral implications of deep-seated polarization. In such an environment, the amount of popular support each party or coalition can garner is limited by the extent of the polarization (Weyland 2020, fn. 13). With more voters dedicated to one party or another and fewer ideologically moderate voters who are willing to switch party loyalty each election cycle, the proportion of votes each party can win is effectively limited to the proportion of voters who strongly identify with that party. The implication of this limit on each party's popular support is that, barring election manipulation, it is difficult for any one party to win the legislative seats or votes necessary to make any significant changes to democratic institutions.

Additionally, any changes to democratic functions are likely to be met with staunch opposition. This opposition itself can have a deterrent effect, as parties in power may refrain from bending the rules to their favor for fear of retaliation by opposing parties in the future (e.g. Helmke, Kroeger, and Paine forthcoming). In some studies, these expectations are borne out empirically. In her analysis of European and South American party systems, Bermeo (2003) argues that ordinary citizens, in fact, did not usually defect to extremist parties or otherwise abandon the political center and that polarization is therefore not an especially salient contributor to democratic backsliding. Instead, she blames cases of democratic collapse on leadership failure and an inability of political elites to accurately gauge public opinion. In a more recent analysis, Lowande and Rogowski (2021) investigate the extent to which major crises—contexts in which countries are often vulnerable to democratic infringements—can increase support for a president's institutional authority to act unilaterally. They find no

such increase in support and conclude that polarization places an upper bound on the extent to which crises can lead to augmented executive authority.

Turning to the micro-level, behavioral tests of polarization and democratic support seem at odds with more general models of public opinion. In particular, the thermostatic model predicts that opinion shifts counter to changes in public policy, such that leftward movements in policy produce rightward movements in opinion, and vice versa (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Wlezien 1995). Claassen (2020b) shows that democratic preferences follow such a pattern; support for democracy decreases as the level of democracy increases, and support improves as democracy declines.

Viewed in this perspective, the present macro- and micro-level theories connecting polarization to democracy appear incongruent. If polarization is negatively correlated with democratic support (setting aside for a moment the issue of causality), it should be positively correlated with level of democracy, *contra* macro-level theories. If polarization is negatively correlated with level of democracy, it should be positively correlated with democratic support, *contra* micro-level theories. Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood (2021) directly tackle the thesis that affective polarization undermines democratic norms in the mass public. They show how results purportedly supporting this hypothesis are observationally equivalent to alternate explanations and, across five experiments, find no evidence for the apparent connection between the two phenomena.

3.2 Polarization as an Outcome of Democratic Crisis

What, then, should we make of the consistent negative correlation between polarization and backsliding? I argue that the observed relationship between these two variables is theoretically and empirically consistent with the opposite causal association: Democratic crises jump-start or reinforce political polarization. In this account, disagreement and conflict over the very meaning of democracy can drive a wedge between political factions. This conflict may be over democracy itself—those in favor and those opposed to its implementation—or

over desires for its reform, such as relaxed executive constraints or weakened protections for civil rights and liberties.

I previously noted that episodes of democratic backsliding—incumbent parties or politicians making detrimental changes to democratic institutions—are likely to elicit strong opposition from those parties or politicians who are out of power. But how does this elite conflict trickle down to the masses, and how does it lead to polarization? Goodman (2022) argues that citizens need to use elite signals to understand democratic conflicts and crises. Because citizens take cues from their preferred parties to make sense of political issues (e.g. Zaller 1992), democratic crises are inherently politicized. They are viewed by citizens through the lens of parties, with the incumbent party or coalition seen as the aggressor (or rightful reformer) and the others seen as the victims (or threats to be guarded against).[2] Once this cleavage is activated, it manifests in heightened positive affect toward one's preferred party and negative affect toward other parties.

But affective polarization is not the only likely outcome; ideological polarization may also arise, with elite cues again at the center of the story. Once an incumbent initiates changes to democratic institutions and catalyzes a democratic conflict, this disagreement over democracy gets reflected in ideology at the elite and mass levels, as parties and individuals align their ideas on the issues with their understanding of democracy and the role of the state.[3] The result is a party system and mass public which increasingly and more consistently identify with "left" or "right."

There are two reasons this could occur. First, policy positions become more aligned with overarching ideology, driven by partisans' conception of democracy. Second, ideological labels become more salient, and parties and individuals apply them as a means to delimit group boundaries and reflect political identities (Conover and Feldman 1981; Mason 2018; Vegetti and Širinić 2019). Democratic backsliding may not cause individuals to move to the extremes

[2]Such conflict can arise even if there are no underlying political or social cleavages, but it may lead over time to such divisions, especially if capitalized upon by populist politicians, who are particularly adept at employing such rhetoric (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019).

[3]On conflict extension, see Layman and Carsey (2002) and Layman, Carsey, et al. (2010).

on any given issue, but it likely does set off a cascade of increasing ideological salience and alignment driven by elite messaging. In sum, democratic crises elicit opposition from parties, politicians, and citizens who are out of power; viewed through the lens of parties, the crisis becomes politicized in the minds of citizens; this politicization and party-centric view of democratic crisis shapes party affect and adherence to ideological principles.

This account finds empirical support in previous work. Goodman (2022) shows that citizen responses to perceived democratic threats in the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany differ depending on which party is in or out of power. Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay (forthcoming) drill down further and deploy a novel survey experimental design to show that, regardless of political context, individuals support democracy-eroding policies when their preferred party is in power and oppose them when their party is out of power.[4]

A series of case studies across three continents shows how this opposition to and politicization of democratic crisis leads to the familiar forms of polarization.[5] Stavrakakis (2018) argues that a populist cleavage in Greece contributed to dehumanizing elite rhetoric and subsequent polarization. Slater and Arugay (2018) show how the roots of polarization in four Asian democracies were decidedly institutional, being activated by abuses of power by popularly elected chief executives. Finally, in one of the foremost examples of polarization and democratic collapse, Mallen and García-Guadilla (2017) argue that polarization in Venezuela was structured around a democratic cleavage, with divergent social groups gradually adopting conflicting views of democracy in response to repeated violations of democratic norms during the presidency of Hugo Chávez.[6] According to these authors, it is the degradation of democratic norms and institutions that sparks mass political polarization.

[4]See also Kingzette et al. (2021).
[5]See Somer and McCoy (2018) for a review.
[6]See also García-Guadilla and Mallen (2019).

4 Data and Measurement

4.1 Explanatory Variable: Mass Polarization

One drawback to most existing studies of polarization and democratic backsliding is their narrow focus, either on specific cases or with data from only one region. In addition to concerns about external validity, lack of spatiotemporal variation in these analyses make causal inference rather tenuous; even a severely under-powered time series analysis is difficult to conduct with only a small handful of data points for each case. In contrast, I use data from all available nationally representative public opinion surveys that investigate my quantities of interest. Surveys in different countries and in different time periods use similar items quite often; soliciting self-placement on the left-right scale, for example, has been a mainstay on public opinion surveys for nearly forty years, even in developing countries. Aggregating and using this data is challenging, however, because it is splintered across time and space, the meanings of question and answer wordings may differ across contexts (Stegmueller 2011), the number of response categories may differ across years and surveys, and different survey programs use different sampling procedures.

To overcome these challenges, I build a Bayesian measurement model to create smooth country-year panels of mass polarization. This model is bipartite: A fully hierarchical dynamic latent variable model similar to the one developed by Claassen (2019) smooths across time and accounts for differential item functioning, sampling error, and heterogeneous item effects. Then, an infinite Gaussian mixture model identifies the number of mixture components (i.e. whether the distribution of opinion is polarized into two, three, or more groups) and estimates the location and dispersion of those components in the latent space. Details on model setup, estimation, and validation are included in the Supplementary Information.

I feed two different types of data to the model to estimate ideological and affective polarization. To estimate ideological polarization, I use left-right self-placement items. These items are not without drawbacks (e.g. Caughey, O'Grady, and Warshaw 2019), but their

ubiquity across survey programs is a major benefit to their use. Additionally, there is good reason to believe respondents' self-placements are reasonably accurate, at least in the aggregate. Colomer and Escatel (2005) show that most survey respondents in Latin America are consistently able to place themselves and parties on a left-right scale. Similarly, Zechmeister (2015) and Zechmeister and Corral (2013)—often cited for showing drawbacks to left-right self-placement items—also show that respondents can place themselves on such a scale quite often, and that those placements are correlated with economic policy positions and vote choice.[7] Although multi-item batteries of policy positions would generally be a preferred data source for measuring ideology, constraints on data availability and computational resources make left-right self-placements a suitable alternative.

To estimate affective polarization, I opt for partisan feeling thermometers, a popular survey item among scholars studying affective polarization in comparative contexts (Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2021; Ward and Tavits 2019). More details on data manipulation are included in the Supplementary Information.

After fitting the measurement model to the two types of data, I finally calculate ideological and affective polarization for each country-year using the cluster-polarization coefficient (CPC) (Mehlhaff 2021). This measure is well-suited for this particular problem because it is a measure of multimodal data structuration that is applied to a distribution, in contrast with other measures that are more useful for estimating polarization among a handful of data points such as party positions (e.g. Dalton 2008). Further, it corrects for different numbers of groups across country-years and takes into account both intergroup heterogeneity and intragroup homogeneity—the two key theoretical components of mass polarization (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007; Esteban and Ray 1994; Ura and Ellis 2012) and precisely the dynamics captured by the mixture model.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 show how ideological and affective polarization track with electoral democracy over time among states classified as liberal democracies, hybrid regimes, and

[7]It is true that these items can have different meanings across national contexts (Zechmeister 2006), but the latent variable model is explicitly designed to ameliorate those problems.

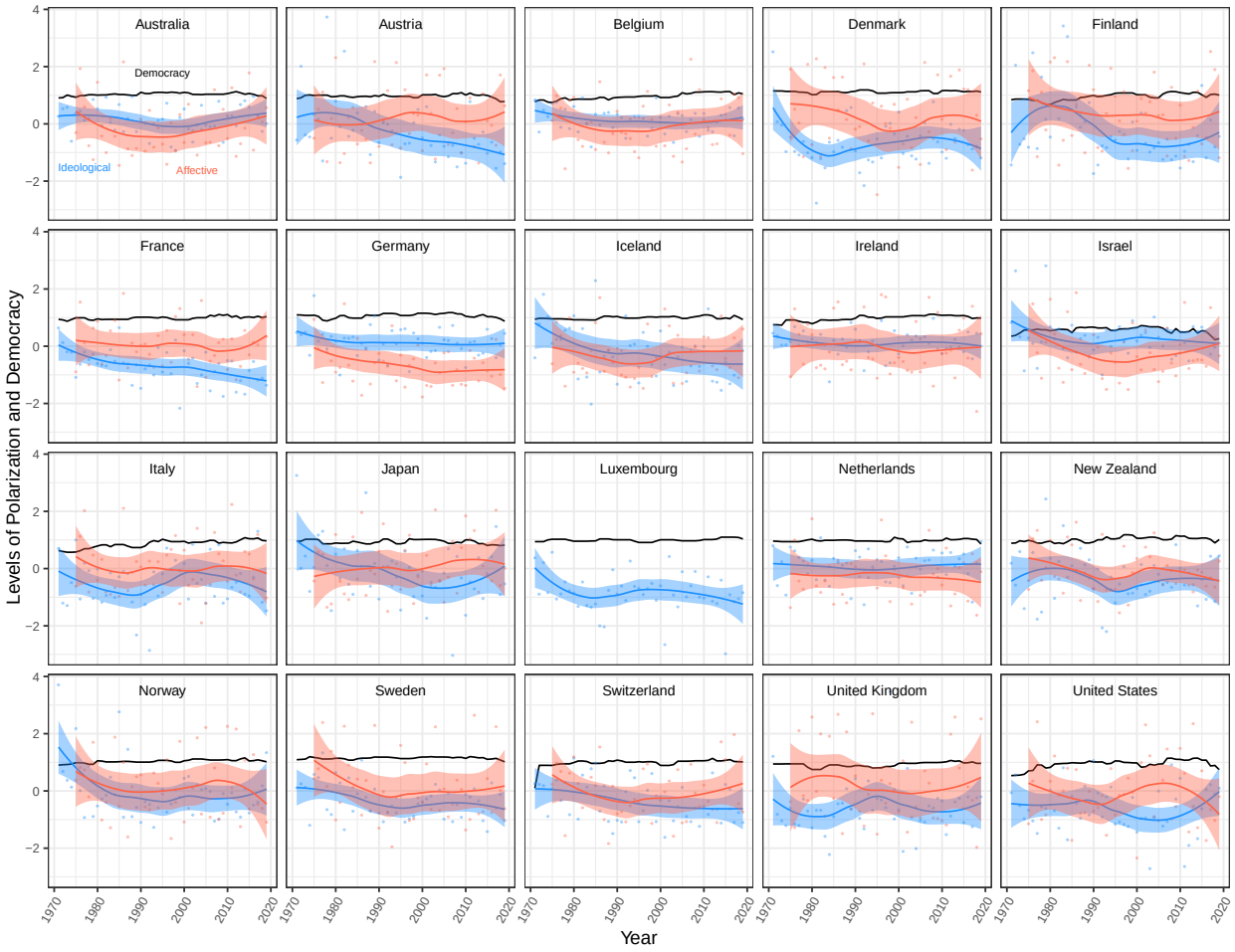


Figure 1: Estimates of Electoral Democracy, Ideological Polarization, and Affective Polarization in States Classified as Liberal Democracies in 1971. Each variable is scaled to be $\sim N(0, 1)$ for ease of comparison. Ideological and affective polarization lines are fit to the data using LOESS; bands represent 95% confidence intervals. These trend lines are for visualization purposes only and are not used in any analysis.

autocracies, respectively, in 1971—the beginning of the time series.[8] Each variable is scaled to be distributed standard normal for ease of comparison. Ideological and affective polarization lines are fit to the data using locally estimated scatterplot smoothing (LOESS) with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates for liberal democracy are very similar and are presented in the Supplementary Information.

[8]I use the "Regimes of the World" index from the Varieties of Democracy project to determine regime classifications (Coppedge et al. 2020; Pemstein, Marquardt, et al. 2020).

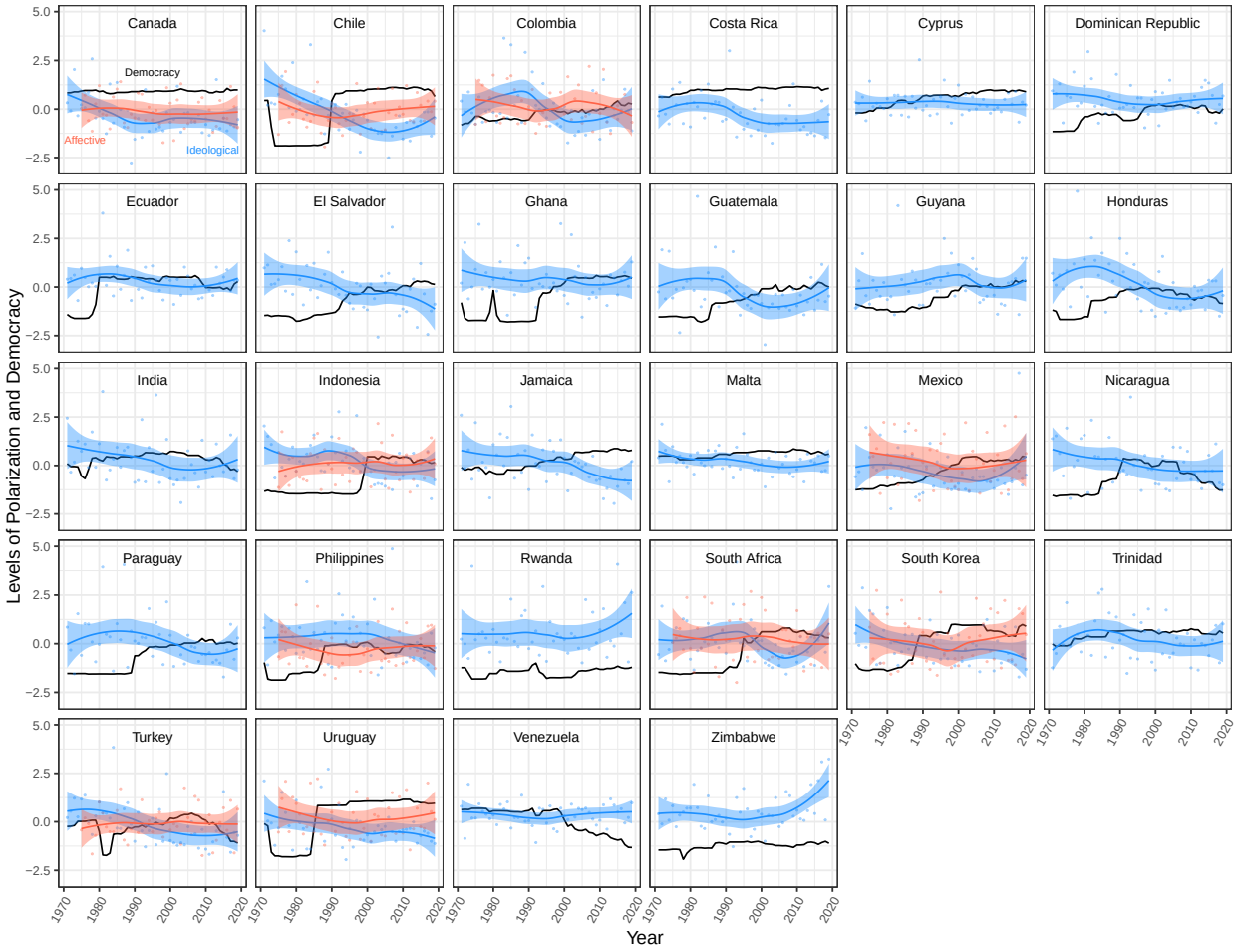


Figure 2: Estimates of Electoral Democracy, Ideological Polarization, and Affective Polarization in States Classified as Hybrid Regimes in 1971. Each variable is scaled to be $\sim N(0, 1)$ for ease of comparison. Ideological and affective polarization lines are fit to the data using LOESS; bands represent 95% confidence intervals. These trend lines are for visualization purposes only and are not used in any analysis.

4.2 Dependent Variable: Level of Democracy

Quantitative analysis of democracy has inspired no shortage of measurement strategies, ranging from dichotomous (Przeworski et al. 2000) to trichotomous (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013) to discrete (Marshall 2020) to continuous (Pemstein, Marquardt, et al. 2020).[9] Fortunately, I am able to bypass much of the minutiae involved in choosing a measure of democracy because most of the measures on offer are structurally incompatible with a variable

[9]For critical reviews and diagnostic analyses of numerous measurements, see Elkins (2000), Munck and Verkuilen (2002), and Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton (2010).

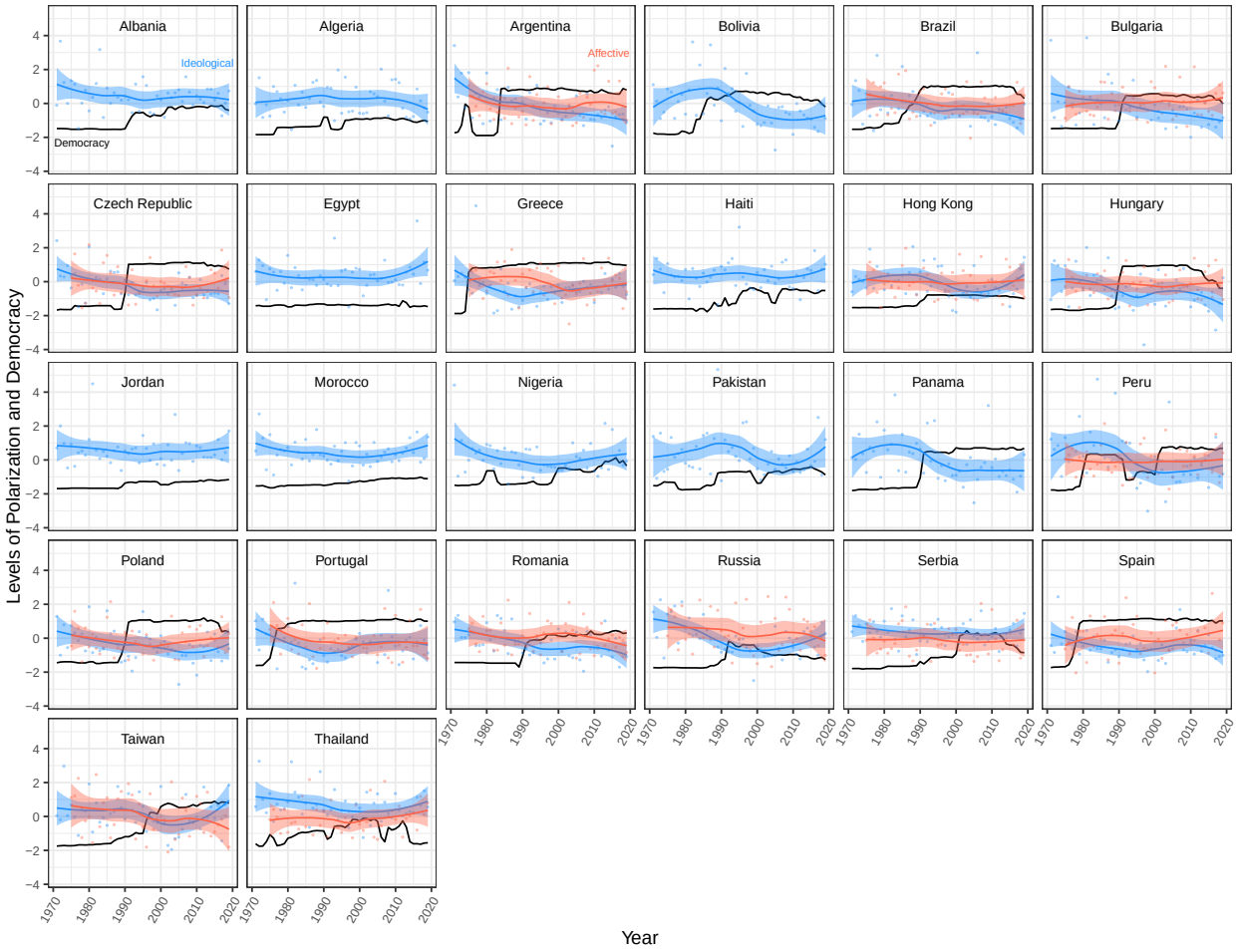


Figure 3: Estimates of Electoral Democracy, Ideological Polarization, and Affective Polarization in States Classified as Autocracies in 1971. Each variable is scaled to be $\sim N(0, 1)$ for ease of comparison. Ideological and affective polarization lines are fit to the data using LOESS; bands represent 95% confidence intervals. These trend lines are for visualization purposes only and are not used in any analysis.

like democratic backsliding. Dichotomous and trichotomous measures are primarily useful only for identifying full-scale regime transitions. Discrete measures that add intermediate semi-authoritarian classifications are more sensitive, but not dramatically so.

Democratic backsliding requires a fully continuous measure sensitive enough to respond to gradual degradations in level or quality of democracy (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project satisfies these requirements and confers several additional benefits (Coppedge et al. 2020; Pemstein, Marquardt, et al. 2020). More than 400 indicators, drawn from factual information and evaluations by country-expert coders,

are aggregated using Bayesian factor analyses into five theoretically distinct dimensions of democracy: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian (Lindberg et al. 2014). I use the electoral democracy component[10] to evaluate backsliding vis-à-vis electoral manipulation and the liberal democracy component[11] to evaluate backsliding vis-à-vis executive aggrandizement.[12] Combining the V-Dem measure of democracy with the smooth panels of mass polarization results in a nuanced, finely tuned model of democratic backsliding.

4.3 Control Variables and Alternative Explanations

I identify four variables that may point to alternative explanations for democratic backsliding and include them as controls.[13] First, although institutions are not exogenous to political factors (Cheibub 2002; Cheibub, Przeworski, and Saiegh 2004; Gryzmala-Busse and Luong 2015), presidential systems may be more prone to backsliding than others (Linz 1990), such as consociationalism (Lijphart 2002). I therefore include a binary indicator of presidentialism. Second, modernization theory suggests that higher levels of economic development decrease the likelihood of democratic collapse (Acemoglu, Johnson, et al. 2009; Lipset 1960; Przeworski et al. 2000), so I include logged GDP per capita for each country-year (*World Development Indicators* 2021). Third, states dependent on natural resources may be less capable of preserving democracy (Haber and Menaldo 2011; Ross 2001). I capture this with a measure of total natural resource rents as a percentage of GDP in each country-year. Finally, cultural theories of democracy have a long and influential history (Almond and Verba 1963; Berman 1997; Putnam 1993), with Islamic traditions often singled out as being inimical to the smooth functioning of democracy (Dixon 2008; Fish 2002; Hofmann 2004). I therefore

[10]Lindberg et al. (2014) describe the electoral democracy component as measuring "the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens through competition for the approval of a broad electorate during periodic elections." This component is thus closely tied to the concept of polyarchy (Dahl 1971).

[11]Lindberg et al. (2014) describe the liberal democracy component as measuring "the intrinsic value of protecting individual and minority rights against a potential 'tyranny of the majority.' This is achieved through constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, and effective checks and balances that limit the use of executive power."

[12]On types of backsliding, see Bermeo (2016).

[13]See Waldner and Lust (2018) for a review of six important strains of democratic backsliding theory.

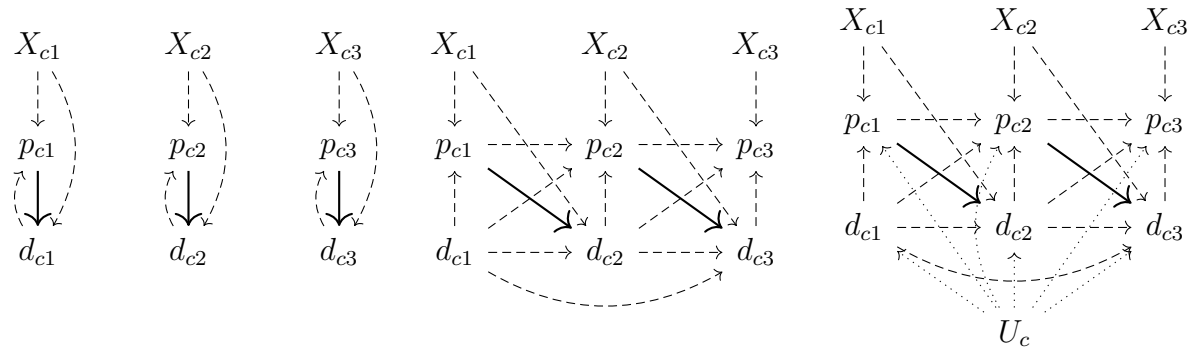
include the proportion of each country identifying as Muslim in the year for which data were most recently available (*World Factbook* 2021).

I exclude three other common explanations from the analysis. First, several influential theories emphasize the relationship between democracy and income inequality (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Ansell and Samuels 2014; Boix 2003), but evidence suggesting these theories apply better to the first and second waves of democratization than to the third wave makes them unlikely candidates for explaining backsliding in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Haggard and Kaufman 2012; Slater, Smith, and Nair 2014). Second, short-term economic crises may play a role in sparking the tense atmosphere that encourages leaders to subvert democratic practices (Bermeo 2016; Linz 1978) and they likely contribute to regime changes more broadly (Huntington 1991; Linz and Stepan 1996; Magaloni 2006), but they may not persist long enough for the gradual nature of backsliding to have a discernible effect and other variables such as institutional structure likely mediate their influence. Finally, while international pressure, occupation, or norm diffusion is certainly relevant (Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Levitsky and Way 2010; Vachudova 2015), the international community has mostly adopted a normative commitment to democracy, not its demise. The absence of international influence may therefore contribute to a favorable environment for backsliding, but it likely provides little explanatory power over and above the other variables I include.

5 Identification Strategy

Identifying the causal effect of polarization on democracy presents several key challenges that preclude the use of cross-sectional analysis or simple linear regression. First, as revealed in the theoretical discussion above, democratic backsliding may exhibit reciprocal causation with mass polarization. Moreover, the effect of any variable on level of democracy is likely to be delayed. Indeed, in line with other scholars (Acemoglu, Johnson, et al. 2009; Boix 2011;

Welzel 2013), I assume that explanatory variables affect only *future* levels of democracy, not present ones. Second, polarization and democracy are likely serially correlated, with the state of each variable at time t directly affected by its state at time $t-1$. This challenge is particularly acute for level of democracy, which may exhibit second-order serial correlation (Claassen 2020a; Teorell 2010). Finally, each country's experience with democracy is idiosyncratically affected by unobserved variables. Countries may experience critical junctures that affect their path to democratization, influence their long-term political culture, or shape key institutions (Collier and Collier 1991; Roberts 2014; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992).



(a) Correlational (b) Autoregressive (c) Causal

Figure 4: Directed acyclic graph depicting relationships among all variables; X_{ct} denotes covariates in country c at time t, p_{ct} denotes polarization in country c at time t, d_{ct} denotes level of democracy in country c at time t, and U_c denotes unobserved effects in country c. Solid arrows represent key effects of interest, dashed arrows represent effects of observed variables, and dotted arrows represent effects of unobserved variables.

Figure 4 illustrates these complex causal processes using directed acyclic graphs (Imai and Kim 2019; Imbens and Rubin 2015; Pearl 2009). X_{ct}, p_{ct}, and d_{ct} denote covariates, mass polarization, and level of democracy, respectively, in country c at time t. U_c denotes unobserved, time-invariant effects in country c.

Figure 4, panel (a) displays a simple correlational model, expressed in (1):

$$d_{ct} = \alpha + \delta p_{ct} + \gamma X_{ct} + \epsilon_{ct}. \tag{1}$$

I fit this model using ordinary least squares (OLS) to get a preliminary sense of how polarization correlates with democracy and refer to it as a "naive OLS" model, as it does not take any temporal structure into account. This model also serves as a reasonable replication of previous work relating mass polarization to democracy, so the effect of interest, δ, should carry a negative sign.

Figure 4, panel (b) moves closer to the realm of causation by imposing the temporal structure discussed above. This general autoregressive model is expressed in (2),

$$d_{ct} = \alpha + \beta_1 d_{c,t-1} + \beta_2 d_{c,t-2} + \delta p_{c,t-1} + \gamma X_{c,t-1} + \epsilon_{ct}, \tag{2}$$

where δ again represents the key effect of interest and can be interpreted as the non-causal effect of polarization at time $t-1$ on level of democracy at time t. I fit this model using pooled OLS and include panel-corrected standard errors to account for within-unit heteroskedasticity and across-unit correlation (Beck and Katz 1995).

Moving finally to a causal model, formally expressing the relationships shown in Figure 4, panel (c) yields a dynamic fixed effects model similar to those common in other studies of democracy (Acemoglu, Johnson, et al. 2008; Boix 2011; Haber and Menaldo 2011). To estimate the effect of polarization on democracy, I specify the model in (3). In this specification, δ can be interpreted as the change in democracy at time t due to polarization at time $t-1$:

$$d_{ct} = \beta_1 d_{c,t-1} + \beta_2 d_{c,t-2} + \delta p_{c,t-1} + \gamma X_{c,t-1} + U_c + \epsilon_{ct}. \tag{3}$$

Models such as this one present another difficulty, however, because the lagged dependent variables will be correlated with the error term when the number of units (in this case, the number of countries c) is larger than the number of time periods t (Keele and Kelly 2006; Nickell 1981). Moreover, this correlation increases in size as t decreases and violates the independence assumption needed to draw inferences from the model. To ameliorate this

bias, I employ a general methods of moments (GMM) estimator with heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors (Windmeijer 2005), which uses an additional dependent variable lag as an instrumental variable (Ahn and Schmidt 1995; Arellano and Bover 1995; Blundell and Bond 1998).[14] This requires the additional assumption that temporally distant levels of democracy affect present levels only by acting through more temporally proximate levels.

6 The Negligible Causal Effect of Polarization on Democracy

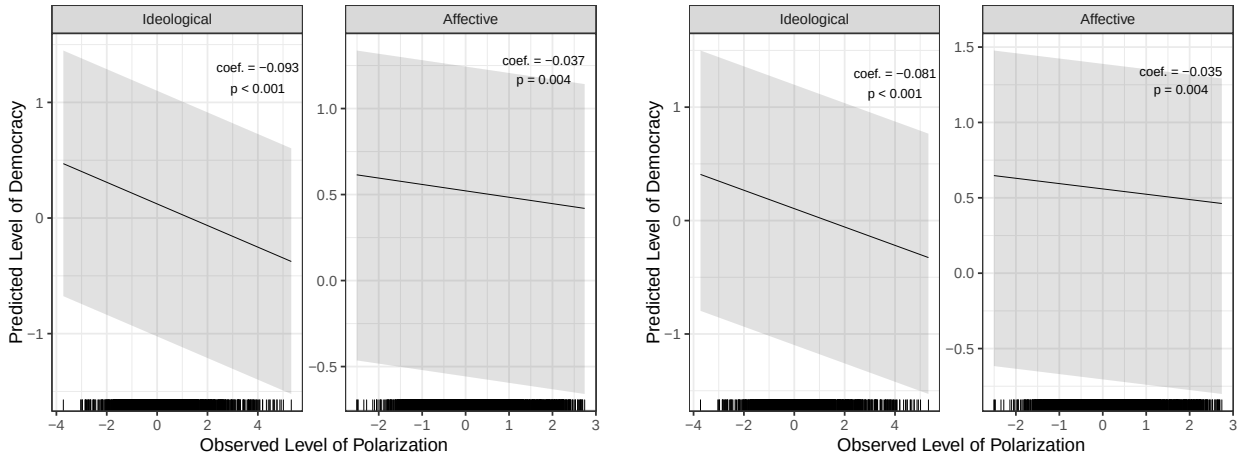
I begin by presenting the results of the naive OLS model to assess the degree to which polarization is correlated with level of democracy. All real-valued variables are scaled to be distributed standard normal, so all parameter estimates can be interpreted in terms of standard deviations. The effects captured by δ in (1) are presented in Figure 5.[15] These results imply that mass polarization is negatively correlated with level of democracy, with a one standard deviation increase in polarization corresponding to a decrease in democracy of between 0.035 and 0.093 standard deviations. This effect is statistically distinguishable from zero at the $p < 0.05$ level across all combinations of electoral or liberal democracy and ideological or affective polarization, and it comports with previous studies of polarization and democracy.

Moving beyond a simple correlational analysis, however, the picture begins to change. Table 1 presents results of pooled OLS and system GMM models used to fit (2) and (3), respectively.[16] Most estimates of δ still carry negative signs (with the exception of models 2

[14]For applied examples of GMM estimation, see Freeman and Quinn (2012), Milner and Mukherjee (2009), and Quinn and Toyoda (2007), among others.

[15]Full model results are presented in the Supplementary Information.

[16]Parameter estimates for dependent variable lags are omitted here in the interest of brevity, but can be found in the Supplementary Information.



(a) Electoral democracy (b) Liberal democracy

Figure 5: Effect of Polarization on Democracy in Naive OLS Model. Plot annotations give estimates and p-values for δ in (1). Error bands give 90% confidence intervals. All real-valued variables scaled to be distributed standard normal.

and 4), but none of them achieve statistical significance at the same $p < 0.05$ level.[17] Further, the point estimates of δ are substantially smaller than in the correlational model, with a one standard deviation increase in polarization now leading to a decrease in democracy of between 0.001 and 0.006 standard deviations—a decrease in effect size of between 89 and 94 percent when comparing system GMM to naive OLS estimates. Hansen-Sargan and Arellano-Bond tests indicate that the GMM instruments are valid and successful in partialling out the second-order serial correlation, so I can be confident that these null results are not simply a consequence of slow-moving dependent variables.

6.1 Testing for Negligible Effects

The analysis so far suggests that the observed relationship between mass polarization and democratic backsliding is primarily correlational and that the causal effect is much more muted. But statistically insignificant parameter estimates are not themselves evidence of a negligible effect. The null hypothesis significance tests upon which the models in Table

[17] Another strategy to capture the effect of polarization on backsliding would be to find each country-year in which the level of democracy decreased and fit a model with temporal structure similar to the pooled OLS models. I pursue this model specification in the Supplementary Information and get similar results.

Table 1: Time Series Models of Polarization and Democracy

	Dependent variable:							
	Electoral		Liberal		Electoral		Liberal	
	Pooled OLS				*System GMM*			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ideological$_{t-1}$	−0.002		−0.001		−0.006		−0.005	
	(0.003)		(0.003)		(0.004)		(0.003)	
Affective$_{t-1}$		0.002		0.0003		−0.003		−0.004
		(0.004)		(0.003)		(0.004)		(0.004)
Presidential$_{t-1}$	−0.002	0.012	−0.007	−0.001	0.023*	0.019	0.013	0.002
	(0.007)	(0.011)	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.026)	(0.007)	(0.024)
GDP$_{t-1}$	0.026*	0.041*	0.021*	0.033*	0.057*	0.154*	0.051*	0.141*
	(0.006)	(0.012)	(0.005)	(0.011)	(0.018)	(0.038)	(0.018)	(0.037)
Resources$_{t-1}$	−0.0004	0.012	−0.001	0.037	0.001	−0.087	0.0003	−0.072
	(0.002)	(0.041)	(0.001)	(0.038)	(0.003)	(0.065)	(0.002)	(0.051)
Muslim	−0.017*	−0.012	−0.012*	−0.014*	−0.023*	−0.024	−0.015*	−0.028
	(0.003)	(0.008)	(0.002)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.017)	(0.006)	(0.018)
Intercept	0.020*	0.018	0.018*	0.026*				
	(0.005)	(0.013)	(0.004)	(0.011)				
N Observations	3404	1919	3404	1919	6721	3790	6721	3790
N Units	86	48	86	48	92	92	92	92
N Time Periods	16-44	24-44	16-44	24-44	49	49	49	49

Note: *p<0.05. Values in parentheses give panel-corrected (OLS) or hetereoskedasticity-consistent (GMM) standard errors. All real-valued variables scaled to be distributed standard normal. See Supplementary Information for parameter estimates of dependent variable lags.

1 rely demonstrate only that the data are *consistent* with polarization having no effect on democracy. To argue for a negligible effect, I need to demonstrate that the data are *inconsistent* with polarization having any meaningful effect on democracy. Confidence intervals which include zero are not sufficient evidence for such a claim because they do not rule out effects that could, in fact, be meaningful (Gill 1999; Westlake 1979).

Instead, I follow Rainey (2014), who lays out a simple, two-step procedure for demonstrating evidence of a negligible effect: First, identify how large an effect must be in order to

be considered meaningful and clearly state a hypothesis for testing whether the effect rises to that level. Second, construct a 90% equal-tailed confidence interval for the effect estimate to test the hypothesis (Berger and Hsu 1996). If the effect size identified as meaningful lies entirely outside the confidence interval, the data can be interpreted as being inconsistent with any meaningful effect.

As a benchmark for meaningful effect sizes, I calculate the standard deviation of electoral and liberal democracy in Denmark, the most stable democracy over the time period under consideration.[18] Across the years from 1971 to 2019, Denmark's levels of electoral and liberal democracy display standard deviations of 0.038 and 0.043, respectively.[19] Democracy in Denmark is so stable that its fluctuations over time likely represent little more than measurement uncertainty. At a bare minimum, effects of polarization should be able to clear this threshold in order to be considered meaningful. This implies a set of hypotheses:

$$\begin{aligned} H_0: &\quad \delta \in (-\infty, -\tau] \cup [\tau, \infty), \\ H_1: &\quad \delta \in (-\tau, \tau), \end{aligned} \tag{4}$$

where δ is the estimated effect size and τ is the threshold for a meaningful effect size—0.038 in the case of electoral democracy and 0.043 in the case of liberal democracy. Therefore, if the 90% confidence interval for the effect size does not contain τ, I should reject the null hypothesis that polarization has a meaningful effect on democracy in favor of the alternate hypothesis that polarization has a negligible effect on democracy.

Figure 6 displays these 90% confidence intervals.[20] Dashed vertical lines indicate $-\tau$ and τ, the values outside which polarization could be interpreted as having a meaningful effect on democracy. Clearly, all confidence intervals are well within these thresholds, regardless of the

[18] I use the standardized electoral and liberal democracy data to make these calculations, so they can be directly compared to model parameter estimates.

[19] Contrast these estimates to those of the most volatile country, Chile, whose electoral and liberal democracy estimates display standard deviations of 1.34 and 1.26, respectively.

[20] See the Supplementary Information for this analysis broken down by regime type.

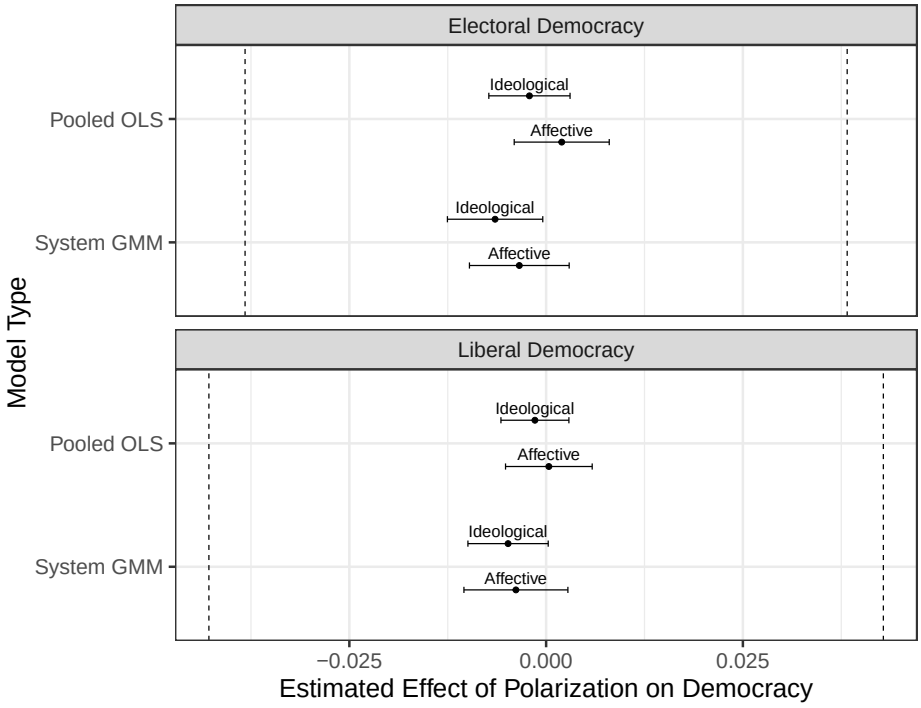


Figure 6: Testing for a Negligible Effect of Polarization on Democracy. Point estimates correspond to δ in (2) and (3) in Table 1. Error bars give 90% confidence intervals. Dotted lines represent $-\tau$ and τ for each dimension of democracy.

type of model, type of polarization, or dimension of democracy. Thus, I reject H_0 in favor of H_1 and conclude that polarization does, indeed, have a negligible effect on level of democracy. Notably, however, the parameter estimate for the effect of ideological polarization on electoral democracy as estimated by the system GMM model actually becomes statistically significant when applying the 90% confidence interval.[21] The causal effect of polarization on democracy may be negative and distinguishable from zero, but it is substantively insignificant.

6.2 Long-Run Effects

Evidence seems to be piling up to support the claim that polarization does not contribute meaningfully to democratic backsliding. However, all the analyses up to this point have investigated only *short-run* effects. It could be that the effects of polarization are cumulative; polarization at time $t-1$ could exert a small effect on democracy at time t but nevertheless

[21] As opposed to the 95% interval used in Table 1.

contribute to a snowballing effect over time, resulting in larger changes in democracy at time $t+1$, $t+2$, and so on. To investigate this possibility, I use the long-run multiplier under the assumption of stationarity:

$$\text{LR}_{p_c} = \frac{\tilde{\delta}}{1 - (\tilde{\beta_1} + \tilde{\beta_2})}, \tag{5}$$

where $\tilde{\delta}$ denotes the estimate for the coefficient on polarization and $\tilde{\beta_1}$ and $\tilde{\beta_2}$ denote the estimates for the coefficients on lagged democracy (De Boef and Keele 2008; Wilkins 2018).

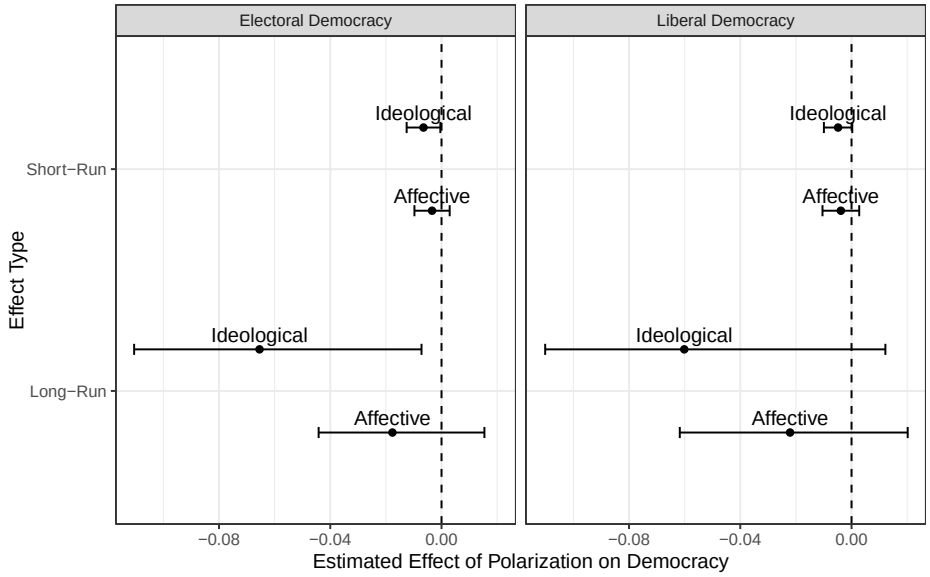


Figure 7: Short-Run and Long-Run Effects of Democracy on Polarization. Short-run point estimates are taken from Table 1. Long-run point estimates are calculated using (5). Error bars give bootstrapped 90% confidence intervals.

Figure 7 displays the estimated short- and long-run effects of polarization on democracy using estimates from the system GMM models in Table 1. An increase in polarization level does appear to accumulate over time—estimates of long-run effects are five to twelve times those of short-run effects. However, these long-run effects are statistically distinguishable from zero in only one case, and the effect sizes are still relatively underwhelming; an increase of one standard deviation in level of polarization leads to a cumulative decrease in level of democracy of, at most, 0.065 standard deviations. Moreover, this effect is distributed over an

arbitrarily long period of time, and it assumes that the shock to polarization is *permanent*. Although this assumption is helpful for comparing immediate and delayed effects, it almost certainly does not hold in reality, implying that the long-run effect is not likely to be fully realized. Although much more dramatic than the short-run effects, the long-term effects of polarization on democracy do not appear to be appreciable.

7 Reversing the Causal Arrow: Polarization as an Outcome of Democratic Crisis

Having argued that mass polarization exerts only a negligible effect on level of democracy, I now turn my attention to the inverse causal relationship and evaluate the extent to which democratic backsliding foments mass polarization. To identify this effect, I use the same basic framework as above, but I now consider polarization as a dependent variable and democracy as a lagged explanatory variable.[22] To complement the new dependent variable, I also include a different set of time-varying control variables to test other possible drivers of polarization: annual percent growth in GDP per capita, economic inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient (both from *World Development Indicators* 2021), and an index capturing the level of social equality in access to political influence and power (Coppedge et al. 2020; Pemstein, Marquardt, et al. 2020).[23]

I again estimate pooled OLS and system GMM models on these data, but I assume that polarization exhibits only first-order serial correlation and therefore use only one dependent variable lag. The system GMM models are instrumented with the second lag of polarization. Breusch–Godfrey and Arellano-Bond tests indicate that this specification is sufficient for eliminating serial correlation, and further dependent variable lags are therefore not necessary.

[22]The analogous expressions to those in (2) and (3) are now given by $p_{ct} = \alpha + \beta_1 p_{c,t-1} + \delta d_{c,t-1} + \gamma X_{c,t-1} + \epsilon_{ct}$ and $p_{ct} = \beta_1 p_{c,t-1} + \delta d_{c,t-1} + \gamma X_{c,t-1} + U_c + \epsilon_{ct}$, respectively.

[23]Since GDP growth is already dependent on the previous year's GDP by construction, I do not lag it further.

Table 2: Testing the Effect of Democracy on Polarization

	Dependent variable:							
	Ideological		Affective		Ideological		Affective	
	Pooled OLS				*System GMM*			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Electoral$_{t-1}$	−0.265*		−0.135		−0.327*		−0.083	
	(0.055)		(0.074)		(0.061)		(0.050)	
Liberal$_{t-1}$		−0.221*		−0.116		−0.289*		−0.073
		(0.050)		(0.068)		(0.059)		(0.051)
Growth$_t$	0.057	0.058	0.103	0.103	0.048	0.050	0.099	0.100
	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.062)	(0.062)
Gini$_{t-1}$	−0.005	−0.007*	0.004	0.003	−0.004	−0.006*	−0.001	−0.002
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Access$_{t-1}$	−0.095	−0.180	0.584	0.555	0.002	0.043	0.101	0.109
	(0.243)	(0.240)	(0.437)	(0.439)	(0.154)	(0.157)	(0.153)	(0.162)
Intercept	0.115	0.251	−0.540	−0.492				
	(0.228)	(0.212)	(0.467)	(0.461)				
N Observations	1351	864	1351	864	2303	1503	2303	1503
N Units	87	49	87	49	92	92	92	92
N Time Periods	1-34	3-34	1-34	3-34	49	49	49	49

Note: *p<0.05. Values in parentheses give panel-corrected (OLS) or heteroskedasticity-consistent (GMM) standard errors. All real-valued variables scaled to be distributed standard normal. See Supplementary Information for parameter estimates of dependent variable lags.

Table 2 displays a clear set of results: decreases in level of democracy are consistently associated with increases in mass polarization, and vice versa. All parameters on democracy variables carry negative signs regardless of the model specification or type of polarization being analyzed, and those parameter estimates rise to statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level in all models of ideological polarization. Further, effect sizes in all model specifications

are appreciable and, in some models, are larger than the effect sizes for any other explanatory variable save for the lagged dependent variables.[24]

Figure 8 displays the estimated short- and long-run effects of democracy on polarization using estimates from the system GMM models in Table 2.[25] Most effect sizes—with the exception of affective polarization on liberal democracy—are statistically distinguishable from zero at $p < 0.1$, and comparing the short- and long-run estimates suggests that the effect of democracy on polarization is not ephemeral; it exerts a consistent negative effect, both immediately and over time. In sum, the preponderance of evidence appears more consistent with mass polarization being causally downstream from democratic backsliding rather than the reverse.

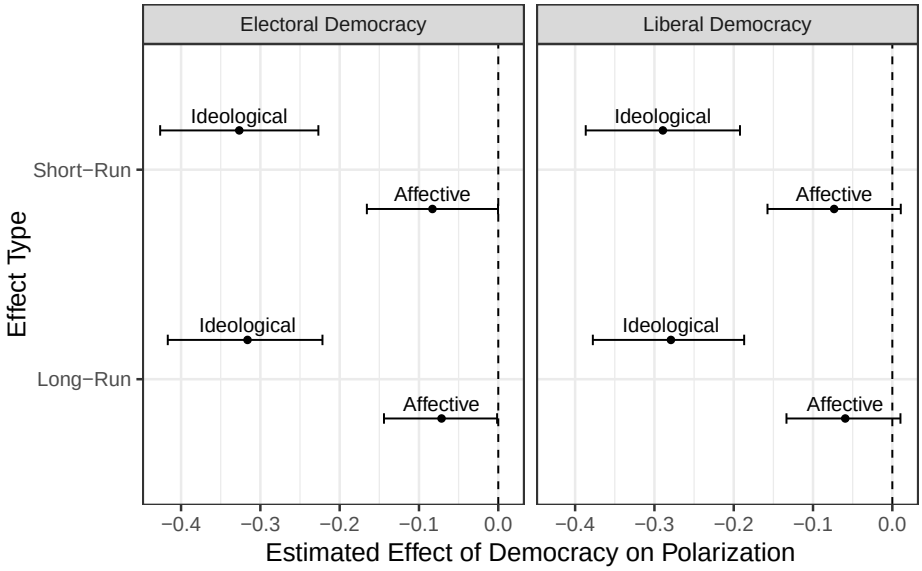


Figure 8: Short-Run and Long-Run Effects of Democracy on Polarization. Short-run point estimates are taken from Table 2. Long-run point estimates are calculated using (5). Error bars give 90% confidence intervals.

[24] As before, all variables are scaled to be distributed standard normal, so parameter estimates can be interpreted in terms of standard deviations.

[25] The long-run multiplier is now given by $\text{LR}_{d_c} = \frac{\tilde{\delta}}{1-\tilde{\beta}_1}$, again under the assumption of stationarity.

8 Discussion

Although the relationship between political polarization and democratic backsliding has long been theorized, numerous methodological challenges have hampered scholars' ability to test that theory in a comparative analysis. I address those challenges using a variety of techniques to not only produce a novel data set of ideological and affective polarization, but also to gain causal identification of the hypothesized relationship between polarization and backsliding. Results suggest that mass polarization contributes little to democratic backsliding. Rather, democratic declines appear robustly related to subsequent mass polarization.

Why, then, do so many tests appear to find the opposite? The simple answer is that most studies of polarization and democracy identify—correctly—a *correlation* between the two phenomena but are unable to establish causation, often for reasons outside the researchers' control. Most comparative evidence comes from a handful of in-depth case studies or cross-sectional analyses, which often struggle to capture enough temporal variation to establish causation. Behavioral tests—even careful experimental ones—may still suffer from the fundamental problem of causal inference because they are almost always conducted in politically polarized countries. In these settings, even individuals with low party affect, for example, exist in and are psychologically calibrated to a polarized political environment, making it impossible to know how they would behave in a more politically congenial environment.[26] This is not to say the findings of behavioral studies are spurious; again, I reiterate that previous work has correctly identified a correlation between polarization and declines in democracy or democratic support. However, without variation in levels of polarization over time or across political contexts, it is difficult to make those claims causal.

The present study is a preliminary probe into the direction and magnitude of the causal relationship between mass polarization and democratic backsliding. As such, it necessarily leaves many stones unturned. Future work should explore causal mechanisms, institutional structures that enable or disable the operation of those mechanisms, and moderating vari-

[26] Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay (forthcoming) thoughtfully grapple with this challenge.

ables which may make democratic backsliding more or less likely to lead to polarization and vice versa. Although I identify overall average effects, the relationship between polarization and backsliding may be a conditional one, with the direction of the causal arrow pointing in different directions depending on context. Somer and McCoy (2018) suggest precisely this, noting three theoretical possibilities, including one I do not address here: that polarization actually enhances quality of democracy. Finally, I leave open the possibility that mass polarization and democratic backsliding exhibit reciprocal causation (e.g. Goodman 2022). That is, democratic crisis may provide a spark for mass polarization, but that spark eventually grows into a blaze as it leads to legislative dysfunction, eroding norms, and politicized meso-level institutions (Pierson and Schickler 2020). This enhanced democratic crisis leads to deepening polarization, and so on in a snowball effect.

In arguing for a negligible effect of polarization on backsliding, I do not mean to suggest that mass polarization is not a problem, nor that we should terminate the search for solutions. Even if democratic backsliding per se is not one of them, polarization still carries undesirable repercussions for some of the most important norms and institutions in liberal democratic society (Binder 2017; Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Klar and Krupnikov 2016). I also do not mean to suggest that democratic institutions do not require active defense. As this study makes clear, one of the gravest threats to civil society may, in fact, be democratic erosion. This gives all the more reason to enhance civil rights and liberties, construct strong institutional safeguards, and protect democracy from those who seek to bend it to their advantage. In an era of global politics characterized by both democratic threats and contentious sociopolitical milieus, clearly understanding the relationship between those phenomena and mobilizing support in the appropriate areas carries heightened urgency.

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