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Polarization in the contemporary political and media landscape

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Political polarization is on the rise in America. Although social psychologists frequently study the intergroup underpinnings of polarization, they have traditionally had less to say about macro societal processes that contribute to its rise and fall. Recent cross-disciplinary work on the contemporary political and media landscape provides these complementary insights. In this paper, we consider the evidence for and implications of political polarization, distinguishing between ideological, affective, and false polarization. We review three key societal-level factors contributing to these polarization phenomena: the role of political elites, partisan media, and social media dynamics. We argue that institutional polarization processes (elites, media and social media) contribute to people's misperceptions of division among the electorate, which in turn can contribute to a self-perpetuating cycle fueling animosity (affective polarization) and actual ideological polarization over time.

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Sixty years ago in America, only a tiny minority of Americans considered politics a deal-breaker for a happy marriage. By 2010, opposition to cross-party unions had shot up to 49% of Republicans and 33% of Democrats [1]. This rising animosity is just one indicator of the increasing political polarization that has attracted the scrutiny and concern of scholars, pundits, and political leaders themselves, with former President Obama identifying polarization as one of the top three worries keeping him up at night [59].[3] The term *political polarization*, however, is a broad label that can refer to several distinct phenomena at both the individual level (perceptions of partisans in the electorate) and the institutional level (e.g. amongst political elites and media). We have three goals in this review: 1) to identify and review evidence for distinct types of polarization among both the electorate and institutions, 2) to offer one possible model (see Figure 1) describing how these types of polarization may be connected in a self-reinforcing cycle, and 3) to speculate on some downstream consequences of polarization worthy of further investigation.

Types of polarization among the electorate

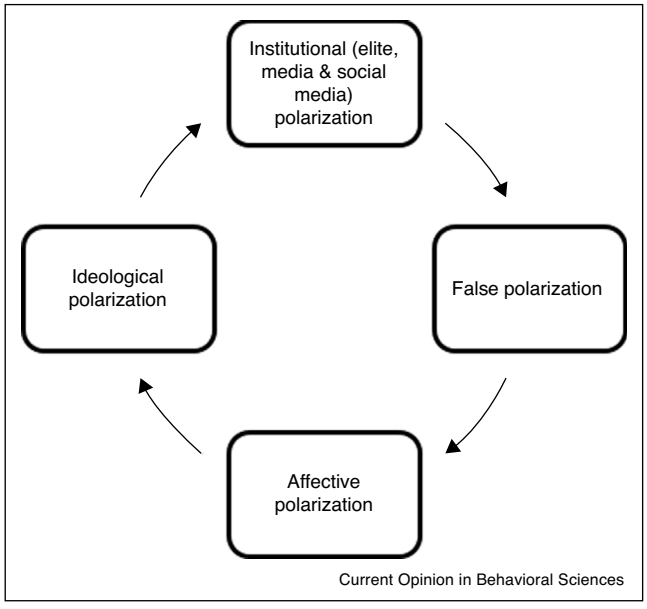
When we state that political polarization is on the rise in the American electorate, what do we mean? First, partisans increasing rejection of political opponents as spouses (as well as friends and neighbors [2••]) reflects rising *affective polarization*, which is the degree to which political partisans dislike, distrust, and avoid the other side [2••,3]. This widening divide — a gap that doubled from 1978 to 2016 [2••] — is not driven by increasing warmth toward own party, but rather due to rising animosity toward opponents, a phenomenon known as negative partisanship [16••,17]. Second, partisans could also be increasingly divided with regard to their preferred policy positions, a phenomenon known as *ideological polarization*. Although researchers debate the extent of genuine ideological polarization among the electorate [13,14] — a debate we will not resolve here — by some estimates this rift in policy preference has risen modestly over time [12]. However, we also point to a third polarization phenomenon: the degree to which partisans overestimate the ideological division between their side and their opponents'. Evidence suggests that partisans increasingly *believe* the ideological divide to be far wider than it actually is — a phenomenon called *perceived* or *false polarization* [12].

How are types of polarization connected?

Is increasing cross-party animosity due to a spiraling rift in the ideological convictions of the electorate? It appears not. Partisans often oppose one another vehemently even when there is little actual daylight between their policy preferences [6] which are often tenuously held and contextually malleable [61] Ideological polarization does not

[3] We focus this review on the US, but comparable patterns have been observed in other nations worldwide [4] with implications for effective functioning of democracies [5].

Figure 1



Possible theoretical model of causal connections between types of polarization. Rising institutional polarization among political elites, partisan media and social media can produce false (illusory) polarization among the electorate. False polarization can in turn fuel affective polarization (especially opponent-party dislike), which may over time foster actual ideological polarization as people become more loyal to own party in the face of increasing animosity for opponents.

always rise in tandem with affective polarization [15] and there is little evidence that the increasingly intense animosity is fueled by the modest shifts in policy support amongst average voters.

However, animosity toward opponents may be determined less by what members of the opponent party *actually* believe than what perceivers *think* they believe. Accordingly, rising affective polarization may be better understood by taking into account *false* polarization. It may be that misconceptions about the opponent group — including the (mistaken) belief that opponents hold views impossibly at odds with one's own — is a more powerful determinant of out-group dislike and distrust than actual opponent attitudes [15,20•,21•]. Stated more bluntly, people may dislike political opponents primarily for deplorable positions that *most of those opponents do not actually hold*.

We also speculate that some attitudes may be more prone to miscalibration than others. Specifically, we contend that false polarization may be particularly evident for vivid, extreme, and egregious opponent positions that characterize the worst of the other side [12,22•], and less pronounced for more mundane policy views. Most partisans correctly recognize that Republicans are more pro-gun and Democrats more pro-universal healthcare on average, so judging these attitudes to be prevalent is not an overestimate. In contrast, Democrats dramatically overestimated the percentage of Republicans with anti-Muslim sentiment, and Republicans far overestimated the share of Democrats who agreed that all police were bad people [22•]. Believing that a large share of the opponent party endorses views one finds not just objectionable but morally appalling is especially likely to heighten animosity. Indeed, if those cross-party assessments were accurate, one could deem this aversion to be justifiable; however, if these perceptions are substantially inaccurate, then animosity may be in large part misplaced.

Does this polarization matter?

Political polarization in itself is not a bad thing, and there is value in sharp disagreement in a system intended to represent the diverse interests of the electorate. We do not suggest that centrism or compromise are always preferable alternatives to polarization. Nonetheless, there is good reason to worry about how profound animosity between parties — especially a miscalibrated animosity based largely on illusory rifts — might affect a functioning democracy. For example, opponent-party animosity may lead people to accept their party's policy stances (even terrible ones) more out of disdain for opponents than endorsement for the position [16••]. Experimental studies demonstrate that voters often support party over policy, endorsing a position when it comes from their side but rejecting the identical proposal when it originates across the aisle [7,8,9•]. Critically, these patterns are exacerbated under conditions of high polarization. In one study [10], respondents evaluated a policy bolstered by either strong, persuasive arguments — or weak ones. When respondents were led to believe parties were relatively unpolarized on the issues, they weighed the strength of arguments in deciding policy support. When respondents believed polarization was high, they ignored argument strength and simply voted in lockstep with their party.

This has profound implications. If the electorate actually weighs evidence for or against policy positions politicians have incentive to develop strong, persuasive proposals. However, if polarization exacerbates partisans' already-robust tendency to reach motivated conclusions in support of their party [11], political elites with the weakest policy positions (policies unlikely to gain popular appeal on their own merit) will be *most* tempted to amplify polarization to ensure the loyalty of their base.

Why is polarization on the rise?

Social psychologists have documented the psychological and intergroup underpinnings of false polarization, demonstrating how groups often believe themselves to be more divided than they really are, resulting in blindness to often-substantial common ground [15,25–27]. However, these basic processes alone offer an incomplete

account of why false polarization is currently on the rise. A cross-disciplinary lens helps to explain its steep increase by considering temporal changes in the political landscape and media ecosystem that feed an illusion of stark polarization among the electorate far outstripping actual disagreement. Specifically, we argue that increases in real and apparent institutional polarization (among political elites, partisan media and social media) may meaningfully account for the intensification of false polarization among the electorate. We contend that political elites have become both more polarized themselves *and* more incentivized to stoke polarization among voters, that partisan media selectively portrays political opponents in caricatured and polarizing ways, and that via social media people actively contribute to shaping a political landscape that disproportionately reinforces and amplifies extremity and outrage.

Elite polarization

Political elites may contribute to polarization amongst the electorate both directly as a result of increasingly polarized ideological positions and actions [34,35], and due to elites' deliberate attempts to fuel animosity. In contrast to ideological polarization in the electorate, polarization among American political elites is no illusion. Polarization in voting patterns and absence of cross-party co-operation has become increasingly stark among American politicians over several decades [28]. The result of elite polarization has too frequently been gridlock as elites prioritize partisan wins over the needs of constituents. Notably, some analyses indicate that polarization among political elites is markedly asymmetrical, with Republican elites moving further right and displaying less willingness to compromise while Democrat elites hold the center [29,30].[4]

Partisans may assume that their opponents in the electorate hold views in alignment with their more extreme political elites. However, judging average voters on the basis of their elites can contribute to false polarization among the electorate because voters a) may not be well-informed about either side's actual policy positions or degree of polarization, b) often do not share the extreme positions held by some elites, and c) may vote for a party due to single-issue policy support (e.g. abortion regulations) even if it means overlooking many party positions with which they disagree [33,36,62].

Political elites may also contribute to polarization by deliberately fueling it with incivility and vitriolic political campaigns. Even though voters typically disapprove of such tactics, they serve both to demonize opponents and to activate opponent anger and animosity [38,39]. Indeed, political elites may be motivated to stoke these divisions because party loyalty increases under conditions of high polarization [10] and because dislike, distrust and anger toward opponents is often a more powerful driver of political attitudes, allegiance, and action than fondness for own party [16••,18,19]. Accordingly, political elites may gain more ground by whipping up fury and fear toward opponents than by behaving laudably. More concerning still, reliance on these polarizing strategies may be especially tempting for political elites when their actions and policy preferences do not benefit the majority of their constituents. Elites with the weakest substantive positions may be especially inclined to turn to a variety of divisive tactics (negative partisanship among them) to ensure the loyalty of their base.[5]

Media polarization

We also contend that changes in the media landscape contribute to increased polarization [40,43]. American media has seen a proliferation of increasingly partisan media including a widening array of online news sources of varying dubiousness. Whereas news in an earlier era was biased toward neutrality and inoffensiveness to capture the largest audience share, in the current high-choice media environment the bias is toward standing out amongst a sea of options [41], which in itself may push for greater polarization [42]. Of particular theoretical interest is the media model described as the 'outrage industry' [43], which selectively amplifies extreme incidents and depicts opponents in an optimally unflattering light. For example, cherry-picked instances of campus progressives behaving illiberally (e.g. deplatformings) are shared with disproportionate frequency in right-wing media bemoaning liberal 'snowflakes' or 'social justice warriors;' left-wing media in turn prioritizes coverage of the relatively rare but unquestionably egregious incidents of white nationalism and other overt bigotry, sometimes casting these acts as reflective of the entire conservative base. This selective reporting style may play a key role in exacerbating misconceptions about opponents and increasing polarization [43]. Evidence suggests that media framing and partisan media consumption

[4] It is worth noting that although we consider misperceptions of partisans from both sides of the ideological divide, this analysis does not require an assumption of *equal* bias. We acknowledge partisan bias exists on both sides [31]; yet cautions about false equivalence are well-taken [32]. We do not aim to resolve this debate, but contend that regardless of potential asymmetries, there is reason to predict that partisans on both sides may misperceive the extremity of average members of the opponent party.

[5] Some scholars have observed that US political elites – and especially Republicans - have increasingly favored policy benefiting economic and corporate elites who, in an era of dramatic economic inequality, have used their outsized resources to exert ever more political influence [60]. Under these conditions, Republicans espouse economic policies (like tax cuts for the wealthy) that are not in fact popular with a majority of their electorate. This "conservative's dilemma" creates a context in which Republicans may be especially incentivized to fostering division and polarization as a substitute for policies that could win support on their own merit.

contribute to negative misperceptions of opponents and to false polarization [20•,22•,44].

The current media landscape can both serve and intensify partisan bias. People actively seek out, trust, and share content that confirms their pre-existing biases and have an increasingly tailored selection of sources to choose from. Further, traditional trust in mainstream media as a source of factual (even if slanted) information has fallen sharply with the rise of 'fake news' discourse. Although the perception of media bias against one's party is a long-documented cognitive illusion [45], rising mistrust in mainstream media reduces its value as a means of establishing a shared factual reality. A recent Knight Foundation survey [46] revealed that most Americans could not name even *one* news source they considered objective, though among Republicans who gave an answer, 60% chose Fox News as 'most objective' (a view decidedly unaligned with the evidence [53]). Classic confirmation bias and motivated reasoning processes [11,47•] may be supercharged in the current media context where any unwelcome factual information can be easily dismissed as untrustworthy or fake.

Social media polarization

The line between traditional media and social media is blurry at best, with an increasing proportion of people getting their news from social media. We offer only a brief sketch of the online landscape and how it may contribute to polarization. As active consumers and producers of online content, people can curate and co-create their social and informational ecosystems more easily than ever. However, people may misjudge what they see online as representative of the real world in ways that fuel polarization. First, outraged and polarizing moralized content is especially likely to be amplified and spread online [37,48], leading people's impressions of opponents to be shaped by atypically extreme but salient outliers. Social media is fertile ground for expressing ingroup allegiance and punishing transgressors [49,50], but when these dynamics go viral the impression made by a single fringe member of an opponent group can be multiplied exponentially. For example, a single racist tweet, or a single post of the feminist hashtag #killallmen may be shared and decried by offended opponents thousands of times, making it increasingly difficult to disentangle degree of amplification from the actual prevalence of these attitudes.

There is ongoing, unresolved debate regarding whether social media contributes to polarization by limiting exposure to ideological diversity (i.e. 'echo chambers') and whether increasing exposure to diverse viewpoints mitigates or worsens polarization [51,52]. The answer is likely 'it depends,' and precise mechanisms are not yet clear. Research is only beginning to document the magnitude of the effects of political micro-targeting, fake news, bots, trolls, and algorithms that select for outrage [53]. For the purposes of our analysis, we simply highlight the potential for social media dynamics to amplify the most polarizing voices, increasing people's misplaced conviction that their partisan opponents are monsters. It may be too soon to say how polarization will be shaped by lives lived online, but because of their reach and malleability, online platforms have the potential to be profoundly consequential.

Polarization feedback loops

In Figure 1 we offer one potential model connecting various types of polarization into a self-reinforcing cycle. We suggest that rising institutional polarization (among elites, media and social media) selectively amplify the worst the other side has to offer, which can feed directly into rising false polarization among the electorate over time via basic psychological processes such as the availability heuristic [55], and out-group homogeneity effects [56]. In turn, false polarization — especially misperceptions of opponents' most egregious attitudes — can intensify outgroup dislike, increasing affective polarization [23]. What about actual ideological polarization? We speculate that increasing affective polarization (especially outgroup dislike) may more often be a cause, rather than a consequence, of ideological polarization over time [16••,24] as partisans blindly maintain allegiance with their side out of the conviction that the other side is immeasurably worse. These types of polarization may be connected in a feedback loop starting with institutions stoking polarization and eventually leading to actual increases in party division over time (which could in turn further encourage continued polarization among elites and media).

Additional downstream consequences of polarization

We identify three additional downstream consequences of these phenomena that deserve research attention as potential mechanisms reinforcing the proposed feedback loop. First, as people encounter increasingly extreme positions held either by their elites or the political fringe of their party, negative partisanship may nudge them toward justifying more and more extreme own-party attitudes through processes of cognitive dissonance and motivated reasoning [10]. Many partisans may privately struggle with the transgressions and extreme policies of their party elites (from accusations of sexual assault to inhumane border detention conditions), but when faced with the alternatives of rationalizing their party or rejecting it, the latter may be unthinkable to the extent that they believe their opponents to be even more monstrous. This dissonance could push people to double down, excusing even the more egregious policies and scandals that would have seemed unthinkable in the recent past.

Second, because we argue that many of the worst impressions of opponents are miscalibrated, opportunities to interact with opponents could help correct misconceptions. However, affective polarization fosters distrust and avoidance of opponents [2••,3], which may ironically foreclose the opportunity to disconfirm misperceptions as people become more and more likely to keep their distance. Third, we speculate that this polarized environment — perhaps especially online — selects for and rewards actors who are willing to express extreme and outrageous views [54]. More moderate partisans may be repelled by this polarized landscape and hesitate to publicly voice dissent. If this form of self-silencing occurs, it leaves public space to be filled — and public impressions formed — primarily by those on the extremes.

Conclusions

Rising elite political polarization has been implicated as a threat to democracy [4,5] and can impede effective action on some of the world's most urgent problems [9•,57]. The current review considers causes and consequences of rising polarization (real and illusory) among the general public. If the public polarizes further, political and media elites will have even greater incentives to fuel the division. Although party disagreement is an essential part of the political process, polarization and animosity based on misconceptions of the other side threatens to misdiagnose problems, leading people to battle imagined enemies and distracting from opportunities for transformative reform [58].

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Anne E Wilson: Conceptualization, Writing - original draft. **Victoria A Parker:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing. **Matthew Feinberg:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing.

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