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Rethinking Political Polarization

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Abstract

The comparative study of political polarization has been central to current debates on the global crisis of democracy. It has been built on uncertain conceptual foundations, though. Established uses of the concept lack a distinctive semantic core as multiple meanings compete against each other. On the basis of a broad reading of the comparative literature, I seek to circumscribe the use and reconstruct the core of political polarization as an instance of extraordinary democratic conflict. In a first step, I delineate the basic parameters of debate by distinguishing between cluster-analytic and conflict-analytic approaches and by specifying the generic type of political conflict that characterizes the polarization of democratic polities. In a second step, I argue for political intolerance as the defining trait of both ideological and social polarization. In a final step, I introduce a third, democratic dimension into the debate: the breakdown of basic democratic trust that leads actors to view their adversaries as "enemies of democracy." Such perceptions spell the end of democratic consolidation. When played among "democratic enemies," democracy stops being "the only game in town."

Keywords: democracy; political polarization; conflict; intolerance; basic democratic trust; democratic enemography

In current debates about "the global crisis of democracy,"[1] one key term is ubiquitous: political polarization. Scholars have associated it with a broad range of democratic damages: the prevalence of confrontation over cooperation, moderation, and compromise[2]; performance failures due to radical policy swings[3]; the entrenchment of policy positions[4]; policy stalemates[5]; problems of coalition

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[1] Larry Diamond, "The Global Crisis of Democracy," *Wall Street Journal*, (17 May 2019), accessed 22 February 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-global-crisis-of-democracy-11558105463.

[2] Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 3 (July 2015): 690–707, at 690; Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 6; Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 166; and Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (January 2018): 16–42, at 18.

[3] Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "The Polarization of American Politics," *Journal of Politics* 46 (November 1984): 1061–79, at 1076.

[4] Matthew L. Stanley, Paul Henne, Brenda W. Yang, and Felipe De Brigard, "Resistance to Position Change, Motivated Reasoning, and Polarization," *Political Behavior* 42 (September 2020): 891–913, at 895.

[5] Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, "Political Polarization in the American Public," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 563–88, at 582.

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formation[6]; the erosion of citizen attitudes, like trust in government,[7] trust in public institutions,[8] and trust among citizens,[9] democratic satisfaction,[10] democratic support,[11] the legitimacy of elections,[12] and democratic legitimacy[13]; and tolerance of and support for political violence[14] and other forms of antidemocratic behavior.[15] Consistent with the manifold pathologies it has been found to generate, the comparative literature has identified political polarization as a driving force of contemporary processes of "democratic backsliding."[16]

Political observers converge in seeing political polarization as a worrisome phenomenon that should command our highest attention, and comparative political science has been reflecting these concerns. For instance, the term "polarization" appears 210 times in the scant 60 pages of the *Democracy Report 2022* by the Varieties of Democracy Institute on the "changing nature" of "autocratization."[17] The number of publications on political polarization has soared. More than half of all journal articles (373 of 704) that have been published on the topic since 1975 appeared over the past five years (since 2018).[18] Overall, the concept has become "central to much of what constitutes the academic study of politics."[19] While its nature, its empirical trends, its causes, and its consequences are still subject to debate, the concept seems to be capturing the haunted democratic spirit of our times.

[6] Andres Reiljan, "'Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines' (Also) in Europe: Affective Polarisation in European Party Systems," *European Journal of Political Research* 59 (July 2020): 376–96, at 379–380.

[7] Fiorina and Abrams, "Political Polarization," 582.

[8] McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization," 18.

[9] Reiljan, "'Fear and Loathing'," 377.

[10] Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76 (November 2012): 405–31, at 428.

[11] McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization," 18.

[12] Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood, "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 129–46, at 143.

[13] Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology," 428.

[14] Joan-Maria Esteban and Debraj Ray, "On the Measurement of Polarization," *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society* 62 (July 1994): 819–51, at 820; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology, " 428; M. Anne Pitcher, "Mozambique Elections 2019: Pernicious Polarization, Democratic Decline, and Rising Authoritarianism," *African Affairs* 119 (July 2020): 468–86, at 471; and Juan Russo, "Polarisation, Radicalisation, and Populism: Definitions and Hypotheses," *Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science* 48 (March 2021): 7–25, at 10.

[15] Ekim Arbatli and Dina Rosenberg, "United We Stand, Divided We Rule: How Political Polarization Erodes Democracy," *Democratization* 28, no. 2 (2021): 285–307, at 285, 288 and 297; Larry Diamond, "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes," *Democratization* 28, no. 1 (2021): 22–42; Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization"; and Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svolik, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 114 (May 2020): 392–409.

[16] Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (January 2016): 5–19. Among many others, see Arbatli and Rosenberg, "United We Stand"; Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Jennifer McCoy, "Hyper-Polarization and the Security of Democracy," in *Handbook on Democracy and Security*, eds. Steven Wilson and Nicholas Seltzer (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 165–87; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization"; and Kenneth M. Roberts, "Populism and Polarization in Comparative Perspective: Constitutive, Spatial and Institutional Dimensions," *Government and Opposition* 57 (October 2022): 1–23, at 8.

[17] Varieties of Democracy Institute, *Democracy Report 2022: Autocratization Changing Nature?* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2022).

[18] Clarivate Web of Science (https://www.webofscience.com). Search Term: Polarization (Article Title). Substantive Field: Political Science. Document Type: Article. Period: All Years (1975 to present). Date of Search: 25 February 2023.

[19] Elizabeth R. Nugent, "The Psychology of Repression and Polarization," *World Politics* 72 (April 2020): 291–334, at 291.

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Remarkably, though, within these intense debates on political polarization, there is little consensus about its meaning. Quite to the contrary, in political science, conceptual islands have emerged on which incongruent meanings of polarization lead an uneasy coexistence. Cluster-analytic research on attitudinal configurations is cut off from conflict-analytic studies of public contention. Conceptions of "affective" and "ideological" polarization compete against each other. Subtypes of beneficial versus harmful polarization proliferate without explication of their content or boundaries. At the same time, the analytic links between conceptions of polarization and their causal relevance for democratic politics remain elusive. Finally, the polarization literature tends to rest upon expansive notions of heightened conflict that lack a distinctive, semantic core, while it tends to overlook a dimension that might constitute such a core: disputes over democratic norm violations.

Until recently, studies of polarization in the United States evolved in rather splendid isolation from "similar literatures in comparative politics."[20] In this article, I strive to integrate U.S. and comparative debates. My ambitions are in part diagnostic (assessing concept usage), in part legislative or therapeutic (i.e., amending it).[21] In essence, I pursue two conceptual goals. First, I strive to reconstruct the notion of political polarization in a way that draws existing islands of debate together and makes them intelligible as complementary parts of a larger conceptual map. This topographical exercise requires recognizing the distinction between structural (cluster-analytic) and relational (conflict-analytic) approaches, clarifying the structure of political polarization as a macro-phenomenon (at the level of democratic polities rather than policy arenas), and explicating the nature of ideological conflicts and social distance as complementary sources of polarization.

Second, I strive to reconstruct the distinctive core of political polarization in a manner that is analytically useful (because it allows us to distinguish polarization from other forms of democratic conflict), empirically plausible (because it identifies salient features of empirical cases of polarization), normatively appropriate (because it avoids pathologizing ordinary democratic politics), theoretically grounded (because it draws on established theories of democratic equilibria), and causally relevant (because it contains building blocks for developing and testing causal hypotheses on democratic regime dynamics). Although inspired by the authoritative conception of polarization offered by Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori half a century ago, my reconstructive proposal adapts it to contemporary circumstances.

Current debates are largely cut off from earlier ones. In Giovanni Sartori's work, the major inspiration of debates on political polarization before the turn of the century, his defining criterion was the presence of antidemocratic parties.[22] This criterion was persuasive in times of ideological clarity when the enemies of democracies were out in the open and declared themselves as such. It has become inapplicable in present times of authoritarian ambiguity when antidemocratic actors dissemble and profess themselves defenders of liberal democracy. Yet, we can adjust it to changed historical circumstances. As I contend, contemporary

[20] Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences," 142.

[21] On "conceptual legislation," see Giovanni Sartori, "Guidelines for Concept Analysis," in *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis*, ed. Giovanni Sartori (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984), 15–85, at 54, 62–63. On "linguistic therapy," see Umberto Eco, "Introduction: The Meaning of The Meaning of Meaning," in Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1989, orig. 1923), v–xi.

[22] Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2005, orig. 1976), chap. VI.1.

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processes of polarization are not driven by the presence of self-declared enemies of democracy but by fears of perceived enemies of democracy. They do not involve ideological attacks on the democratic center by extremist parties but rather disputes about the democratic commitments of mainstream political actors across the ideological spectrum. Rather than an absence of a basic democratic consensus, they involve a breakdown of "basic democratic trust."[23] The result is similar: as the ground rules of democratic dispute resolution turn uncertain, democracy veers off its equilibrium and ceases to be "the only game in town."[24]

Cluster Analyses

In the early nineteenth century, the term "polarization" had acquired a variety of meanings in the natural sciences, describing (in the eyes of the social scientist) rather exotic and incomprehensible movements of physical phenomena like light, heat, electrodes, and raw sugar.[25] The first recorded figurative entry of the word into the realm of politics dates back to 1862, when a distraught observer of British politics complained about "that wretched polarization of our whole national thought…into the two antagonistic currents of common Whiggism and common Toryism."[26] As the citation illustrates, since early on, the notion of political polarization has served to express concerns about heightened confrontation between entrenched political camps.

When, well over a century later, in his analysis of "polarised pluralism,"[27] Sartori offered the first systematic treatment of political polarization in comparative politics, he could draw on this background understanding of political polarization in ordinary language, that is, its association with high-intensity conflict. As he submitted, polarization was defined by "real conflict" over the "fundamentals" of politics.[28] In subsequent comparative work, authors have commonly preserved the semantic anchorage of political polarization in political conflict. Treating it as "a catch-all [term] to indicate a sense of deep political tension between rivals,"[29] they have associated it with sharp opposition and hard confrontation.[30] To indicate its conflictual nature, they have employed expressions like "intergroup conflict dynamics,"[31] "intergroup antagonism,"[32] "inter-group hostility,"[33] and "the escalation of divisive politics."[34]

[23] Andreas Schedler, "Basic Democratic Trust," Budapest: CEU Democracy Institute, DI Working Paper 1 (January 2023), https://democracyinstitute.ceu.edu/working-papers.

[24] Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 26.

[25] See "Polarize" and "Polarization," *Oxford English Dictionary* (www.oed.com).

[26] "Polarization" (Section II.5), *Oxford English Dictionary* (www.oed.com).

[27] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, chap. VI.1.

[28] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, 14.

[29] Matthew Whiting and Stefan Bauchowitz, "The Myth of Power-Sharing and Polarisation: Evidence from Northern Ireland," *Political Studies* 70 (February 2022): 81–109, at 82.

[30] Exceptions are, for example, Nugent, "The Psychology of Repression"; and Frederic Gonthier and Tristan Guerra, "How Party Polarization Shapes the Structuring of Policy Preferences in Europe," *Party Politics* 29 (March 2023): 384–93.

[31] Esteban and Ray, "On the Measurement of Polarization," 820.

[32] Sigifredo Laengle, Gino Loyola, and David Tobón-Orozco, "Bargaining Under Polarization: The Case of the Colombian Armed Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 57 (July 2020): 551–563, at 552.

[33] Reiljan, "'Fear and Loathing,'" 377.

[34] Thomas Carothers and Andreas E. Feldmann, "The Intensification of Divisive Politics," in *Divisive Politics and Democratic Dangers in Latin America,* eds. Thomas Carothers and Andreas E. Feldmann (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021), 2.

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So, yesterday as well as today, the concept of political polarization has been describing a form of conflict. In its most abstract and elementary definition, a "conflict" is a "clash" or "active disagreement" between opposing parties.[35] Distinct from political consensus, it is more than mere distinctiveness but less than war. Polarization is not a form of violent conflict but political conflict (even though it often ignites fears of violence). In contrast, the dominant literature on political polarization that has emerged from U.S. political science has stepped outside these deep traditions of ordinary language use. It has cut the concept loose from its association with political conflict. Paying little attention to dynamics of collective confrontation, it has studied aggregate configurations of individual attributes.

It was well after Giovanni Sartori's treatise on political polarization (and without much reference to it) that students of U.S. politics reintroduced the concept into political science. They did so amidst concerns about the increasing rhetorical heat, harshness, and incivility of political debate in the wake of the 1994 "campaign of agitation" by Republican Newt Gingrich.[36] Since then, polarization has been the proverbial specter haunting the United States. Subsequent developments did nothing to frighten it away. To the contrary, it has grown bigger and scarier with the rise of the Tea Party, uncompromising Republican obstructionism under President Obama, and Donald Trump's contentious presidency, culminating in his refusal to concede defeat in the 2020 elections and the 6 January 2021 assault on Congress.

The emergence of partisan polarization in the United States went against everything we thought we knew about American political parties in the mid-twentieth century. They were supposed to be broad political coalitions whose ideologies and policy positions differed almost as much within as between them.[37] Thus, when the Republican Party started replacing pluralism, moderation, and compromise by the disciplined determination of "opposing, obstructing, discrediting, and nullifying"[38] everything on the other side of the political aisle, political scientists set out to examine the structural bases of this "overheated," "inflammatory rhetoric."[39] Was it anchored in genuine political differences among political parties? Did the distribution of policy preferences match the polarization of political discourse? Were the policy preferences of either party elites or partisan citizens becoming more similar within parties (internal homogeneity) and more dissimilar between parties (external heterogeneity)?[40]

[35] The quotes are from the entries on "Conflict" in *The Free Dictionary* (https://www.thefreedictionary.com/conflict) and the *Cambridge Dictionary* (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/conflict).

[36] Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), Mobilereference e-book, chap. 2.

[37] For summaries, see Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), chap. 1; Fiorina and Abrams, "Political Polarization"; and McCoy, "Hyper-Polarization," 3–4.

[38] Mann and Ornstein, *It's Even Worse,* L. 267.

[39] Mann and Ornstein, *It's Even Worse,* L. 354, 1160.

[40] For overviews, see Alan I. Abramowitz, "The Polarized American Electorate: The Rise of Partisan-Ideological Consistency and Its Consequences," *Political Science Quarterly* 137 (Winter 2022), 645–74; and McCarty, *Polarization*. For applications outside the United States, see Zack P. Grant, "Crisis and Convergence: How the Combination of a Weak Economy and Mainstream Party Ideological De-Polarization Fuels Anti-System Support," *Comparative Political Studies* 54 (June 2021): 1256–91; Juan Rodríguez-Teruel, "Polarisation and Electoral Realignment: the Case of the Right-wing Parties in Spain," *South European Society and Politics* 25, no. 3–4 (2020): 381–410; Paula Surridge, "Britain's Choice: Polarisation or Cohesion," *Political Quarterly* 92 (January–March 2021): 119–24; and Whiting and Bauchowitz, "The Myth of Power-Sharing." For a discussion of structural polarization measures in the study of social inequality, see Esteban and Ray, "On the Measurement of Polarization"; and Joan-Maria Esteban and Ray Debraj, "Comparing Polarization Measures," in *Oxford Handbook of Economics of Peace and Conflict*, eds. Michelle R. Garfinkel and Stergios Skaperdas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 127–51.

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With its focus on aggregate patterns of individual policy positions, the political science literature on ideological polarization in the United States has largely severed the association between polarization and conflict. It has adopted what we may call a structural or cluster-analytic perspective on polarization rather than a relational or conflict-analytic one. Rather than studying the evolution of conflict between political parties, political scientists have studied the spatial evolution of political preferences among their leaders and followers. Rather than examining conflictive relations between collective actors, they have been examined emergent clusters of individual attitudes. No doubt, attitudinal patterns are an important part of the overall structure of group conflict. They form latent bases of collective conflict that may or may not translate into manifest conflict. The conflict itself, however, remains outside the field of vision. The same applies to the debate on sorting (shifts in party membership rather than opinion), which is a variation on the same theme of partisan differentiation.[41]

The cluster-analytic perspective on political polarization has turned into the dominant approach in political science. Among the twenty most-cited, English-language political science papers on polarization (according to the Social Science Citation Index),[42] sixteen embrace such a view, with ten of them covering the United States (see Appendix online). Defining polarization as the presence of structural differences among groups, they all study the distribution of either subjective or objective attributes of individual group members along three dimensions: intragroup homogeneity, intergroup heterogeneity, and intergroup distance. Most cluster-analytic studies of polarization in the United States within this top group of influential papers examine either the structure of political attitudes among elites,[43] citizens,[44] or both.[45] Two papers look at partisan divides among blog readers[46] and between Internet news sites.[47]

Cluster-analytic studies of polarization tend to be highly selective in their empirical scope. Their focus on policy positions involves the neglect of other sources of polarizing conflict, and their focus on citizen attitudes involves the neglect of open conflict in the public sphere. Of course, mapping distributional patterns of individual attributes yields valuable insights into objective structures of societal heterogeneity. To understand the dynamics of polarizing conflicts in the public sphere, we need to understand their resonance among citizens and their potential demand

[41] See, for example, Fiorina and Abrams, "Political Polarization"; and Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*, chap. 5.

[42] Clarivate Web of Science (https://www.webofscience.com). Search Term: polarization (Article Title). Substantive Field: political science. Document Type: article. Period: all years (1975 to Present). Date of Search: 6 May 2021. Number of results: 555.

[43] Marc J. Hetherington, "Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization," *American Political Science Review* 95 (September 2001): 619–31; Poole and Rosenthal, "The Polarization of American Politics"; and Matthew S. Levendusky, "Clearer Cues, More Consistent Voters: A Benefit of Elite Polarization," *Political Behavior* 32 (March 2010): 111–31.

[44] Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, "Is Polarization a Myth?" *Journal of Politics* 70 (April 2008): 542–55; Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel A. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, "Polarization in the American Public: Misconceptions and Misreadings," *Journal of Politics* 70 (April 2008): 556–60; Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey, "Party Polarization and 'Conflict Extension' in the American Electorate," *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (October 2002): 786–802; and Markus Prior, "Media and Political Polarization," *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013): 101–27.

[45] James N. Druckman, Erik Peterson, and Rune Slothuus, "How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation," *American Political Science Review* 107 (February 2013): 57–79.

[46] Eric Lawrence, John Sides, and Henry Farrell, "Self-Segregation or Deliberation? Blog Readership, Participation, and Polarization in American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (March 2010): 141–57.

[47] Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling, "New Media and the Polarization of American Political Discourse," *Political Communication* 25, no. 4 (2008): 345–65.

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for more or less of it. However, given their dissociation from ordinary understandings of polarization as intense "intergroup conflict,"[48] cluster-analytic scholars may reconsider their choice of terminology. If they wish to continue using the language of "polarization" in the study of attitudinal clusters, at great causal distance from polarizing conflicts, they may signal the distinctiveness of their perspective by referring to "structural" or "attitudinal" polarization.

Conflict Analyses

Even if, in ordinary language as well as in the specialized language of comparative political science, the notion of political polarization commonly carries strong connotations of collective conflict, the nature of conflict seems rather nebulous. What kind of conflict exactly are we talking about?

The Public Nature of Conflict

On the wide conceptual tree of conflict, political polarization sits on a very specific branch (see fig. 1). The concept does not describe subjective conflicts that play out within the mind of individuals nor private conflicts that unfold outside the political arena. As its defining adjective tells us, it refers to political conflicts: disputes over the definition and decision of collective matters. More narrowly, it refers to political conflicts within nations, which excludes international conflicts (though not domestic clashes over international relations). We might habitually state, for instance, that Britain was polarized over Brexit but not that the United Kingdom and the European Union were polarized over Brexit. Furthermore, when talking about political polarization, we are talking about entrenched conflicts, not fleeting disagreements, and about nonviolent conflicts, not armed confrontation (even though polarizing conflicts often conjure threats of violence).

We are also talking about public conflicts, not structural or latent ones. Given the primacy the U.S. literature on polarization has granted to the study of public opinion, the public nature of polarization may not be self-evident. Yet, when political observers are concerned about political polarization, they are commonly concerned about ways in which contending political actors (including citizens) behave in public: how they talk to each other, or stop talking to each other, or start yelling at each other. Although polarizing conflicts often express deep-seated societal cleavages (structural conflicts) or submerged tensions (latent conflicts) among societal groups, they unfold in the public sphere (country case studies of polarization tend to convey a good sense of such public conflicts that tear their polities apart).[49]

[48] McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization."

[49] See, for example, Aries A. Arugay and Dan Slater, "Polarization Without Poles: Machiavellian Conflicts and the Philippines' Lost Decade of Democracy, 2000–2010," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 (January 2019): 122–36; Adrienne LeBas and Ngonidzashe Munemo, "Elite Conflict, Compromise, and Enduring Authoritarianism: Polarization in Zimbabwe, 1980–2008," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 (January 2019): 209–26; María Pilar García-Guadilla and Ana Mallen, "Polarization, Participatory Democracy, and Democratic Erosion in Venezuela's Twenty-first Century Socialism," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 (January 2019): 62–77; Murat Somer, "Turkey: The Slippery Slope From Reformist to Revolutionary Polarization and Democratic Breakdown," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 (January 2019): 42–61; and Yannis Stavrakakis, "Paradoxes of Polarization: Democracy's Inherent Division and the (Anti-) Populist Challenge," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (January 2018): 43–58. For an early study of polarizing rhetoric, see Richard D. Raum and James S. Measell, "Wallace and His Ways: A Study of the Rhetorical Genre of Polarization," *Communication Studies* 25, no. 1 (1974): 28–35.

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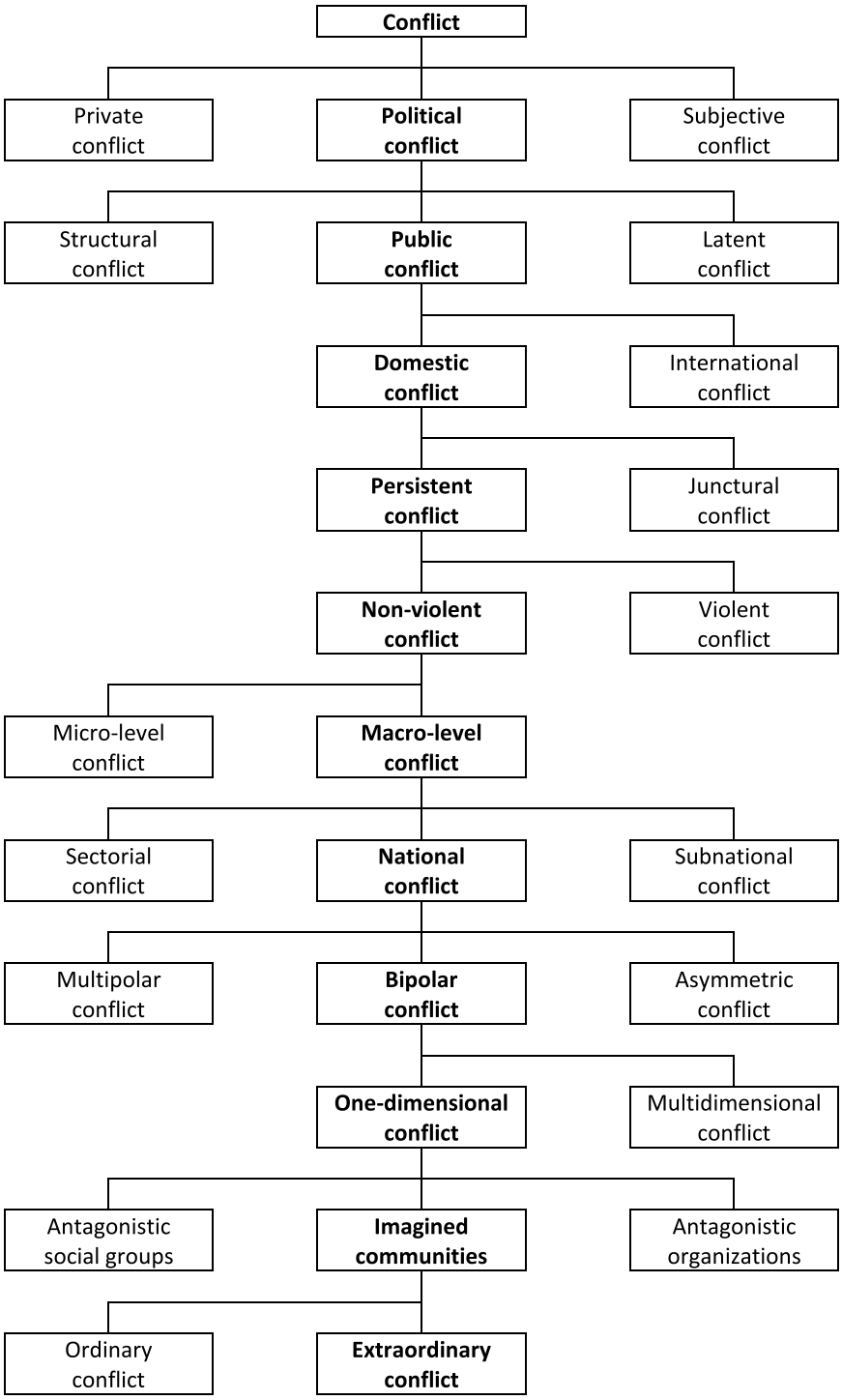

Figure 1. Polarization as Conflict (Ideal Type)
Source: Author elaboration.

The Macrostructure of Conflict

None of the above defines political polarization yet, because public conflicts in domestic politics are ubiquitous in democracies. Yet, before we further specify the

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empirical domain of polarization by climbing down "the ladder of generality,"[50] we need to clarify our level of analysis. If political polarization is an attribute of political communities (rather than a feature of discrete conversations), it may apply either at the subnational level to policy fields or local communities, or at the national level to the democratic citizenry as a whole. In the comparative study of politics, we tend to adopt the latter perspective. In accordance with our macro-analytical traditions, our research on political polarization typically refers to the polarization of entire countries, polities, or regimes. In such a perspective, the notion of political polarization commonly describes collective conflict at the highest level: a rift dividing the entire political community, the nation. In ideal-typical terms, this entails four things.

First, we are talking about extraordinary conflicts, rather than the ordinary quarrels of democratic competition (a theme I take up below). Second, we are talking about conflicts that are not contained within certain policy fields, institutional spheres, or subnational spaces but hold the entire polity in their grip. When specific social groups, like students, miners, or health workers, take their grievances to the streets, or when political confrontations shake certain regions or localities, we would not describe the overall democratic polity as polarized unless these conflicts have nationwide resonance.

Third, we are talking about bipolar conflicts among two dominant camps, which excludes "multipolar" competition within a fragmented field of actors as well as asymmetric conflict between mainstream actors and small groups of challengers (e.g., insurgents, protest movements, anti-political establishment parties). In Sartori's account, polarized party systems had a tripartite structure in which the existence of political extremes at the outer poles of the ideological spectrum went hand in hand with the "physical occupation" of the political center. In a vicious circle, extremism created incentives for centrism, and the institutionalization of the center strengthened the centrifugal drives of extreme actors.[51] Most contemporary processes of polarization, by contrast, do not feed on the presence of a strong center but on its weakness. Rather than confronting the political center, the contending camps clear it out and turn it into an empty space.[52]

Finally, at its extreme, polarization spells the end of overlapping conflicts. Two parties may well compete on multiple dimensions and in democratic two-party systems they usually do. But not under prototypical polarized conditions. In a grand process of political realignment, polarization creates a dividing line between them that rearranges, subordinates, or supersedes all other political divisions. In its shadow, "the normal multiplicity of differences in a society [aligns] along a single dimension and people [conceive] politics and society in terms of 'Us' versus 'Them.'"[53]

The Protagonists of Conflict

Social conflict is a relational term. It denotes a broad, abstract category of (nonharmonious) relations between actors. The same is true for polarization. Yet, while

[50] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*.

[51] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, 217–21.

[52] For instance, Carothers and Feldmann, "The Intensification of Divisive Politics," 1; Fiorina and Abrams, "Political Polarization," 566; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization," 23, 27; Roberts, "Populism and Polarization," 4; and Stavrakakis, "Paradoxes of Polarization," 44.

[53] McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization," 16.

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some types of conflict are defined by the nature of the parties involved (as in marital conflicts or labor conflicts), the nature of polarizing actors is rather open (and subject to confusion). Although the literature commonly refers to these antagonistic camps as "social groups,"[54] they are not, of course, groups in the classic, sociological sense of small, face-to-face gatherings, of "a number of people [who] are together or in the same place."[55]

Though it is tempting to conceive them as such, they are not "collective actors"[56] either. Their organizational infrastructures and their corresponding capacities of collective action vary widely. In some cases, like the United States, both camps are formed by long-standing parties and their leaders, members, and sympathizers. More personalized cases, like Mexico under Andres Manuel López Obrador or Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, tend to be structurally asymmetric. Here, a polarizing leader and his personal party confront a fragmented field of antagonistic political and social organizations.

If it does not seem adequate to conceive the two poles of polarizing political conflicts as social groups or collective actors, we may think of them as Benedict Anderson thought of nations, as "imagined political communities."[57] Unlike nations, opposing political camps cannot imagine themselves free and sovereign, because they are locked in conflict within a given political system. Still, they do seem to imagine themselves, just like nations, as bounded communities of equals. For the sake of precision, we might consider the imagined quality of its protagonists as a structural feature of political polarization. Being neither groups nor organizations, its antagonists are symbolic constructions, which accounts for their openness. They may conceive themselves as nations or people, as religious or ethnic groups, or as followers of political parties, leaders, or ideologies.

Extraordinary Conflict

From the preceding discussion, we may derive a formal definition of political polarization as a division of national politics into two opposing imagined communities. Such a definition, I believe, captures the genus of polarization, the general category of conflict to which it belongs: bipolar political conflicts at the national level. It does not, however, identify its distinctive traits within that family. The question is: does the concept of political polarization denote conflicts of certain intensity or certain quality? It is a well-established proposition in democratic theory that democracy requires moderate conflict: neither too little nor too much. It presumes conflict, but also needs to contain it. As Seymour Martin Lipset put it: "A stable democracy requires relatively moderate tension among its contending political forces."[58] This entails three broad possibilities:

- *Shallow conflict:* Democratic competition without meaningful programmatic distinctions among contending parties (elections without choice).

[54] Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*.

[55] "Group," Merriam-Webster Dictionary (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/group).

[56] James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1990).

[57] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

[58] Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, orig. 1959), 78–79.

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- *Ordinary conflict:* The normal clash of ideas and interests between political adversaries (genuine democratic competition).
- *Excessive conflict:* An extraordinary escalation of political confrontation that threatens to overwhelm democratic procedures of conflict settlement.

Where should we situate polarized conflicts? In the literature, the answer is neither consensual nor clear. As outlined above, when U.S. political scientists began to trace the polarization of political attitudes among elites and citizens, their initial point of reference was a system of broad ideological convergence between two dominant parties. Given this point of departure, they adopted a very thin notion that equated partisan polarization with ideological distinctiveness. They conceived polarization as the process that has been transforming two ideologically overlapping parties with inconsistent policy views into bounded clusters with consistent ideologies. Instead of a normal distribution of ideological positions around the center, it has produced a bimodal distribution. Programmatic diversity and confusion within parties gave way to programmatic clarity and uniformity. For U.S. scholars of ideological polarization, ideological divergence constitutes the defining trait of polarization. To the extent that political parties are programmatically consistent and differ from each other, they count as polarized.[59]

From the viewpoint of democratic theory, it is unclear why we should take the mere clustering of ideological positions to be indicative of polarization. If political parties in the United States have become more ideologically distinct and consistent, we may celebrate their newly won programmatic clarity. We may welcome the emergence of meaningful interparty differences as an essential ingredient of democratic pluralism.[60] Yet why should we describe the ideological distinctiveness of political parties as a state of partisan polarization?

In contradistinction to its cluster-analytic conception in U.S. political science, outside academia as well as in the comparative study of politics outside the United States, the notion of political polarization commonly denotes relations of intense conflict, not mere divergence or disagreement. The level of intensity that demarcates the presence of polarization in conflict-analytic perspective remains unclear, however. Do we talk about high-intensity conflicts within normal democratic competition? Or do we talk about extraordinary confrontations that transgress the boundaries of ordinary democratic conflicts?

Often, it is the latter. Often, scholars of political polarization explicitly focus on highest levels of contention. They intend to capture relations of "extraordinary," "excessive," or "pathological" conflict, rather than "normal" (even if heated) democratic conflict. And they invoke the idea of endangered democratic equilibria. Escalating conflicts, they warn, may push democracy off its "delicate equilibrium"[61] between contentiousness and restraint. They conceive polarization as a situation of extreme conflict that jeopardizes democratic practices and institutions

[59] For many others, see McCarty, *Polarization*.

[60] See, for example, Russell J. Dalton, "The Quantity and the Quality of Party Systems: Party System Polarization, Its Measurement, and Its Consequences," *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (July 2008): 899–920, at 916–917; Hetherington, "Resurgent Mass Partisanship," 629; Levendusky, "Clearer Cues," 111, 125; McCoy, "Hyper-Polarization"; Reiljan, "'Fear and Loathing,'" 377; and Roberts, "Populism and Polarization," 17.

[61] Stavrakakis, "Paradoxes of Polarization," 48.

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of conflict resolution, as it pushes normal democratic competition off the edge into "a downward spiral of anger and division."[62]

The literature has tried to bridge the rift between scholars who use the term polarization to describe healthy or normal levels of democratic conflict and those who use it to describe pathological or excessive levels of conflict by distinguishing two broad subtypes of polarization under varying labels: "normal" versus "severe," "beneficial" versus "pernicious,"[63] "legitimate" versus "dangerous," "benign" versus "malignant,"[64] or "circumstantial" versus "profound" polarization.[65]

These distinctions raise various questions. One concerns the empirical scope of the concept of polarization. Does it make sense to conceive it as an overarching term for any kind of political conflict? Normatively, such a broad conception risks pathologizing ordinary democratic conflicts as worrisome instances of polarization. Conceptually, its risks making the concept superfluous. Why should we use it if it does not describe a distinctive phenomenon? No doubt, as contemporary debates on issues like immigration, abortion, and the climate crisis illustrate, clashes over the definition and solution of collective problems can be very intense in democratic politics. Yet, redescribing the adversarial relations between political contenders that are intrinsic to liberal democracy as instances of political polarization runs against methodological demands for "conceptual differentiation."[66] If any consistent political disagreement between collective actors (even if intense and passionate) denotes polarization, then every functional democracy must be considered polarized. It is hard to see how the concept can remain meaningful unless we preserve not just its anchorage in political conflict but its association with excessive conflict. Of course, a piece of concept analysis like this one lacks the "legislative powers" to stop scholars from reconceiving healthy democratic pluralism as "polarization." Still, the burden of justification lies with them.

Now, if we conceive polarization as some kind of extraordinary conflict, we need to clarify its relation to ordinary conflict. One initial question is: Should we regard the space between the two concepts as a seamless continuum? Is it a mere matter of degree, or is there a qualitative threshold separating the two categories? The answer is two sided. On the one hand, the very idea of extraordinary, excessive, or pathological conflict lives from the intuition that it designates a qualitatively different world of democratic politics. The bifurcated, causal intuitions authors have been building into their conceptual distinctions reflect such categorical thinking. When they label ordinary conflicts as benign or beneficial and extraordinary ones as malignant or pernicious, their implicit causal assumptions point to contrasting categories of democratic conflict.

On the other hand, even if political polarization may not be a mere matter of degree, it is evident that it comes in degrees. As a macro-phenomenon, the polarization of national politics is the aggregate result of myriad actions by myriad actors who may be polarizing or depolarizing. Besides, like other "concepts of

[62] Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, "Introduction," in *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, eds. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2019), 1.

[63] McCoy, Rahman and Somer, "Polarization," 18.

[64] Stavrakakis, "Paradoxes of Polarization," 45, 47.

[65] Russo, "Polarisation, Radicalisation, and Populism."

[66] David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research," *World Politics* 49 (April 1997): 430–51.

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movement"[67] (e.g., its counterpart, democratic consolidation), political polarization may refer either to a process or its final outcome. It may indicate a systemic condition, the movement toward it, or progress within (further polarization within a polarized environment). However, if, indeed, we can draw a categorical distinction between ordinary and extraordinary democratic conflicts, what constitutes its defining criterion? If there is, indeed, a qualitative threshold that separates nonpolarized from polarized settings, where does it lie? Giovanni Sartor's classic analysis of polarization points the way toward a possible answer.

The Empty Core

Sartori conceived polarized pluralism as a complex syndrome that included the presence of a strong political center ("the physical occupation of the center") and the centrifugal competition by extremes at both sides of it ("bilateral opposition").[68] At its definitional core, though, stood "the presence of relevant anti-system parties" as its "first distinctive feature."[69] Such parties, Sartori held, embrace an "extraneous ideology" that rejects "the values of the political order" and leads them to question "the legitimacy of the regime." Located at "maximal ideological distance" from the political center, they do not oppose "the government but the very system of government." Rather than an "opposition on issues" they represent an "opposition of principles."[70] Though he did not discuss the quantitative versus qualitative nature of polarization, he seemed to assume a qualitative leap once political conflict crossed certain thresholds of intensity. Political polarization, he stipulated, involves the highest degree of ideological conflict, which, in turn, involves a distinct type of conflict: direct ideological challenges to the democratic system.

Concepts are anchored in their contexts. They are children of their times. Writing in the mid-1970s, Sartori identified six empirical instances of polarized pluralism in the history of democracy. In the order of their "proximity to the "'pure' type,"[71] these were Weimar Germany, post-war Italy, and the French Fourth Republic (as prototypical cases), as well as Chile (1945–1973), Finland (1945–1975), and Spain (1931–1936) (as more idiosyncratic cases).[72] Sartori's concept sheds sharp analytic light on these historical cases. It captures their basic structure of conflict: powerful, principled attacks on the democratic center from both sides of the political spectrum. That is, it captures the structure of conflict that defined the era of systemic competition among Fascism, Communism, and democracy, "the age of extremes"[73] from 1917 through 1989.

Notwithstanding occasional rhetorical efforts to revive the spirit of existential confrontation between grand ideological designs, this era is gone. Some may say

[67] Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

[68] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, 119 (all page references are to the 2005 re-edition, emphases removed).

[69] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, 117.

[70] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, 118. On the ambiguities of the concept of "anti-system parties," see Giovanni Capoccia, "Anti-System Parties: A Conceptual Reassessment," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 14 (January 2002): 9–35.

[71] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, 137.

[72] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, chap. VI. 2.

[73] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

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it never existed. Even in interwar Europe, antidemocrats claimed the democratic label for their dictatorial projects,[74] and during the Cold War, even law-abiding communist parties often found themselves outlawed in the name of democratic self-defense (such as the Communist Party of Germany in 1956). And even in Sartori's world of classificatory certainties, there was one big exception, the elephant in the room of polarized pluralism: the Italian communist party. By classifying it as "anti-system party,"[75] Sartori dismissed its both practical and programmatic embrace of democracy and legitimized its continuing exclusion from national government. Clearly, when analyzing his own country, Sartori did not rely on official ideological declarations but exercised political judgment. In any case, today, in the age of democracy (and even in the age of its "global crisis"), open authoritarian ideologies have become rare. With the exception of Islamism, neo-Nazism, and the Chinese Communist Party, contemporary political actors profess at least lip service to liberal democratic values. Even fascists, like Vladimir Putin, speak the language of antifascism.[76]

The disarticulation of authoritarian ideologies does nothing less than destroy the historical meaning of political polarization. It has emptied its definitional core. If the notion has been revived nevertheless, what has taken the place of open systemic conflict to define its nature? How have scholars carried it over from a world of grand confrontations between incompatible political ideologies to a world of rhetorical convergence among self-proclaimed democrats?

Despite contemporary debates on the global rise of illiberalism and populist authoritarianism,[77] scholars of polarization have sought for answers outside Sartori's criterion of democratic contention along two nonprocedural dimensions of political conflict. Students of ideological polarization have focused on the policy distance between political camps that embrace opposing ideas, interests, and values. Students of affective polarization have focused on the emotional distance between political camps that view each other as amoral power players. Within both schools of thought, there is no agreement on the intensity of conflict that marks polarization. Yet, within both, there are voices that associate polarization with the presence of existential-threat perceptions that lead to a specific type of democratic norm transgression: the treatment of adversaries as political enemies (intolerance). I find this a persuasive criterion of polarization, though not the only one. After reviewing debates on polarization that have been conducted along these two dimensions of ideology and affect, I introduce a third, democratic dimension that has been neglected in the literature: the breakdown of basic democratic trust.

Social Polarization

When social groups face each other in conflict, they are unlikely to do so with an open heart and an open mind. Rather than viewing each other with emotional

[74] See Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011).

[75] Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, 16.

[76] Timothy Snyder, "We Should Say it. Russia Is Fascist," *New York Times*, 19 May 2022, accessed 23 February 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/russia-fascism-ukraine-putin.html.

[77] See, for instance, András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021); and Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

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neutrality and argumentative fairness, they will be prone to develop negative attitudes toward each other: negative emotions (antipathy) as well as negative perceptions (prejudice). Scholars of social or affective polarization highlight these negative attitudes between the parties in conflict.

One the emotional side, they describe partisan polarization as a relationship of intense mutual antipathy. They commonly rely on measures of emotional coldness and use terms like "dislike," "animosity," "hostility," "hatred," and "loathing" to convey the intensity of negative feelings between political adversaries.[78] On the cognitive side, they describe patterns of prejudice between partisans who combine "positive evaluations of the ingroup" with "hostile evaluations of outgroups."[79] The latter typically appear as "hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded" carriers of extreme political views.[80] As Liliana Mason put it, under the spell of social polarization, "our conflicts are largely over who we think we are,"[81] as well as, one may add, over who we think "they" are. Social practices of boundary creation, like residential segregation, communicative segregation, and declining rates of intermarriage, tend to widen and harden both the cognitive and the emotional distance between the two camps.[82]

Although only four of the twenty most-cited political science articles on polarization listed in Table A in the appendix (see supplemental materials online) examine its emotional dimension (all with a focus on partisan polarization among U.S. citizens), the study of affective political polarization has been greatly expanding in recent years.[83] It throws light on central aspects of citizens' subjective experiences of political polarization. Still, it calls out, I believe, for two clarifications. First, its focus on emotions tends to obscure the origins of emotions. Although "there has been little to no research identifying the mechanisms underlying affective polarization,"[84] emotions and perceptions likely reinforce each other. Rather than being random or irrational, the shared emotions that sustain affective polarization are likely to be grounded in shared reasons. Quite plausibly, they are "evaluative emotions" that arise from beliefs about the (positive or negative) "behavior or character" of social actors.[85] The mutual prejudices among groups feed their mutual antipathies.[86]

Second, within the literature on affective polarization, the treatment of group prejudice tends to mix two domains of evaluation: cognitive failures by adversaries (like stupidity, ignorance, and incompetence) and moral failures (like dishonesty, cruelty, and selfishness). Social prejudices are multidimensional. When social

[78] See, for instance, Reiljan, "'Fear and Loathing'"; Laengle, Loyola, and Tobón-Orozco, "Bargaining Under Polarization," 1–2; and McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization," 19.

[79] Iyengar and Westwood, "Fear and Loathing," 690.

[80] Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences," 130, 134. See also Table A (see supplemental materials online) in the online Appendix (column "Perception of Adversaries").

[81] Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*, 4.

[82] See, for example, Anna Braun, "Most Democrats Who Are Looking for a Relationship Would Not Consider Dating a Trump Voter," Pew Research Center (24 April 2020), accessed 26 February 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/24/most-democrats-who-are-looking-for-a-relationship-would-not-consider-dating-a-trump-voter/.

[83] Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences," offer an overview of the U.S. debate.

[84] Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences," 141.

[85] Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 142.

[86] On the "rational foundation" of affective polarization, see also Abramowitz, "The Polarized American Electorate," 672.

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groups develop negative views of collective others, they may charge them with many faults. They may question their capacities to understand the word and to formulate and carry out effective policies. Such cognitive-instrumental critiques, which presume good faith and admit remedial action, are the bread and butter of democratic competition. From democratic perspective, it is more concerning when imagined communities consider others as amoral, dividing the word into good people ("us") and bad people ("them"). Such moral divisions are likely to be central to social polarization. Rather than being mere correlates of emotions, moral judgements are likely to define the quality and intensity of emotions like anger and indignation (that respond to experiences of injustice). Most likely, it is the moral division of the political world into good and bad guys ("moral polarization") that engenders its emotional division into likable and unlikable people ("affective polarization").[87]

Identity and Ideology

If political polarization thrives upon "a Manichean, 'us against them' view of the political world,"[88] with all the antipathies and prejudices that go along with it, which are the substantive matters that generate such deep moral and emotional fissures in the political community? Scholarly views are divided. Some think these collective antagonisms tend to be anchored in "long-standing and deep-cutting divisions."[89] Others think they are potentially groundless.

On the one hand, since Sartori's historical reflections on polarized pluralism, scholars of ideological polarization have seen political polarization as an expression of intense conflicts over ideas, interests, or values (social cleavages). It surges when political actors abandon the political middle ground and embrace "policy extremism."[90] The corresponding "ideological distance" between them turns democratic politics into "a battlefield between rival blocs, each posing an existential threat to the other."[91] In this view, political polarization is a consequence of political polarity, which is, the extreme divergence of policy positions.[92]

On the other hand, students of social or affective polarization hold that polarization may unfold without any substantive motives of conflict. It may arise from the pure logic of competition between social groups that may not differ substantially in their interests or ideologies. Drawing its theoretical intuitions from social identity theory developed by Mustafer Sherif, Henri Tajfel, and others,[93] this

[87] On polarizing political moralization, see Kristin N. Garrett and Alexa Bankert, "The Moral Roots of Partisan Division: How Moral Conviction Heightens Affective Polarization," *British Journal of Political Science* 50 (April 2020): 621–40; and Wolfgang Merkel, "New Crises: Science, Morality and Democracy in the 21st Century," *Filozofija i društvo* 33, no. 1 (2022): 265–77.

[88] Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology," 421.

[89] Murat Somer and Jennifer L. McCoy, "Transformations through Polarizations and Global Threats to Democracy," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 (January 2019): 8–22, at 15.

[90] Graham and Svolik, "Democracy in America?", 392.

[91] Murat Somer, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke, "Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies," *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (2021): 929–48, at 3.

[92] See also Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Eric Groenendyk, Michael W. Sances, and Kirill Zhirkov, "Intraparty Polarization in American Politics," *Journal of Politics* 82 (October 2020): 1616–20.

[93] See, for example, Henri Tajfel, "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination," *Scientific American* 223 (November 1970): 96–103; Henri Tajfel, Michael G. Billig, Robert P. Bundy, and Claude Flament, "Social Categorization and Intergroup Behaviour," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 1 (April–June 1971): 149–78; and Muzafer Sherif, "Experiments in Group Conflict," *Scientific American* 195 (November 1956): 54–59.

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school of thought conceives the very act of social categorization as the original, generative act of polarization. Trace a boundary between individuals and the rest follows. Once you achieve "group identification and differentiation,"[94] the self-reinforcing dynamic of polarization takes its course.[95] In this perspective, political polarization appears not primarily as a political phenomenon but a sociopsychological one. More than a confrontation of ideas or interests, it is a "clash of identities"[96] that activates "primal human tendencies towards group isolation and group comparison."[97] Because its primary force is psychological, affective polarization needs no genuine divergence of interests or ideas to thrive. The mutual contempt between the two groups is endogenous to their competitive struggle. Just like sports fans, they cheer for their own side and want to see it victorious while they despise the other side and want it defeated. They need no grievances or ideologies to feed their passions.

Both dimensions of social polarization—the moral polarization between contending actors as well as their ensuing affective polarization—appear to be strongly correlated with political polarization. Social identity theory seems well equipped to account for their centrifugal strength, but it is less clear that it can account for their origins. The primary objections against designating group distinctions as prime movers of polarization are three. One is empirical variance: only few of the myriad collective distinctions in liberal democracies translate into polarizing conflicts. Another is conceptual overlap: mere emotional polarization without political content is insufficient to identify instances of political polarization; otherwise, we would have to talk of political polarization whenever social groups, such as sports fans, loathe each other, even if nothing divides them in political terms. A third objection is depoliticization: even if the sources of hostility and prejudice are not ideological, they may still be political rather than psychological. Perhaps, when looking at policy disagreements, we have been looking at the wrong place. Disputes over democratic commitments may be more salient than disputes over ideology (as I will outline below).

Overall, extant research on the role of ideologies and emotions in political polarization has forced us to recognize that the relation between emotional and ideological distance is contingent. Partisan animosity and policy disagreement are two independent dimensions that may or may not be related. One may go without the other.[98] Political adversaries may view each other with intense hostility even if they share similar political worldviews. Conversely, they may hold incompatible worldviews but still view each with genuine respect.[99] Although the U.S. literature has emphasized the "weak association between ideological and affective polarization,"[100] the degree to which partisan hostility derives

[94] Nugent, "The Psychology of Repression."

[95] Among others, see Nicholas Dias and Yphtach Lelkes, "The Nature of Affective Polarization: Disentangling Policy Disagreement From Partisan Identity," *American Journal of Political Science* 66 (July 2022): 775–90; Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences"; Iyengar and Westwood, "Fear and Loathing"; Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*; Klein, *Why We're Polarized*.

[96] Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*, 8.

[97] Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*, 11.

[98] See also Roberts, "Populism and Polarization," 5–7.

[99] Roberts, "Populism and Polarization," 19.

[100] Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology," 424. For a diverging assessment, see Abramowitz, "The Polarized American Electorate."

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from genuine political divergences seems to be highly "variable"[101] in other polarized democracies.[102]

Regarding the distinctive, extraordinary quality of polarizing conflicts, debates on both ideological and affective polarization lead to the same conclusion. In and by themselves, policy disagreements, as well as feelings of antipathy, are ordinary ingredients of democratic competition. They are so under one crucial condition, though: as long as they remain within the bounds of democratic tolerance.

Political Intolerance

Since self-identified antidemocratic parties have either disappeared or turned marginal in most democracies after the end of the Cold War, contemporary authors usually do not follow Sartori and include, or even consider, their presence as a defining attribute of political polarization. Nonetheless, they often do describe a specific type of democratic norm transgression as an intrinsic element of polarization that accounts for its pernicious consequences: "intolerance."[103]

In democratic conflicts, "the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated."[104] Intolerant actors break this democratic norm of mutual recognition. Refusing to recognize their adversaries as legitimate participants in the democratic arena, they treat them as enemies who do not deserve equal political standing. Viewing others as political enemies does not necessarily involve a desire of physical annihilation in the spirit of Carl Schmitt,[105] nor even a determination to expel them from political debate and competition. At its minimum, though, it involves the idea that they represent some sort of existential threat and, therefore, forfeit their right to fair treatment and equal democratic protection.

The spread of political intolerance has been a recurrent theme in studies of political polarization. By a common observation, in polarized environments, hostile feelings often translate into hostile practices among political actors who start "resignifying political adversaries as enemies to be eradicated through authoritarian rule."[106] Abandoning democratic values of pluralism and mutual respect, they engage in "the delegitimization of political opponents,"[107] "the vilification of political opponents,"[108] or "the demonization and dehumanization of legitimate challengers."[109] In essence, these observations about the toxic quality of polarization that turns politics into an "existential struggle"[110] capture the transformation of bounded competition into unbound confrontation. In Chantal Mouffe's terms,

[101] McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization," 17.

[102] See also Dias and Lelkes, "The Nature of Affective Polarization"; Nugent, "The Psychology of Repression"; and Roberts, "Populism and Polarization."

[103] Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*, 6.

[104] Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London and New York: Verso, 2005, orig. 1999), 14.

[105] Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1932).

[106] Stavrakakis, "Paradoxes of Polarization," 49.

[107] Carothers and Feldmann, "The Intensification of Divisive Politics," 1.

[108] McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization," 35.

[109] Stavrakakis, "Paradoxes of Polarization," 45. See also, among many others, Arbatli and Rosenberg, "United we Stand," 298; Garrett and Bankert, "The Moral Roots," 637; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization," 19; Roberts, "Populism and Polarization," 17; Somer, McCoy, and Luke, "Pernicious Polarization," 10.

[110] McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization," 21.

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they describe the move from "agonistic" to "antagonistic" conflict[111] in which opponents turn into enemies "to be defeated at all cost."[112] Arguably, this transition is not just a "ubiquitous"[113] but a defining feature of political polarization. As numerous authors have pointed out (more or less obliquely), high-stakes, high-intensity clashes are not polarizing in themselves but only become so when conflict parties start breaching the principles of democratic tolerance.[114] Marking the transition from ordinary to extraordinary conflict, political intolerance pushes actors into polarization.

Concepts often rest upon causal assumptions or "causal models."[115] Previewing the entire conceptual architecture of political polarization I am striving to reconstruct, figure 2 illustrates my causal intuitions on the ideological and social dimensions of political polarization. Within the ideological dimension, the figure indicates its two component parts: material conflicts over interests and normative conflicts over values. Within the social dimension, the downward causal arrow from moral to emotional rejection indicates the derivate status I ascribe to the latter, while the two horizontal arrows depict moral polarization itself as endogenous to either ideological or democratic threat perceptions. The upward arrows that connect both dimensions to political intolerance indicate the onset of polarization: the transition from ordinary democratic conflicts to the extraordinary logic of unbound conflict. As a breach of democratic norms, political intolerance forms part of the third, forgotten, democratic dimension of polarization. Disputes about democratic norm transgressions, however, go well beyond "struggles for recognition"[116] among political adversaries.

The Democratic Dimension

When citizens perceive their political adversaries as enemies or sources of existential threat, they may be worried about policy issues or about democratic norms. They may either have "substantive fears" about public policies that threaten their vital interests or fundamental values. Or they may have "procedural fears" about political acts or actors that threaten the foundations of democratic coexistence.[117] By framing the debate on the nature of polarization as two-dimensional, with ideological divergence and social antipathy competing for primacy, the current literature on polarization has tended to exclude this third, democratic dimension: fears that the very foundations of democratic coexistence, the ground rules of open and fair democratic conflict resolution, are threatened by political adversaries.

By a famous metaphor, "[d]emocracy is consolidated when under given political and economic conditions a particular system of institutions becomes the only game

[111] Mouffe, *The Return of the Political.*

[112] Abramowitz, "The Polarized American Electorate," 671.

[113] Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 (November 2019): 234–271, at 259.

[114] See, for example, Diamond, "Democratic Regression"; Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences," 136; McCoy and Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization," 258; and Simon Schama, "Onward Christian Soldiers," *The Guardian* (5 November 2004), accessed 26 February 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/05/usa.uselections2004.

[115] Gary Goertz, *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[116] Axel Honneth, *Kampf um Anerkennung: Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992).

[117] On these two dimensions, see Schedler, "Basic Democratic Trust."

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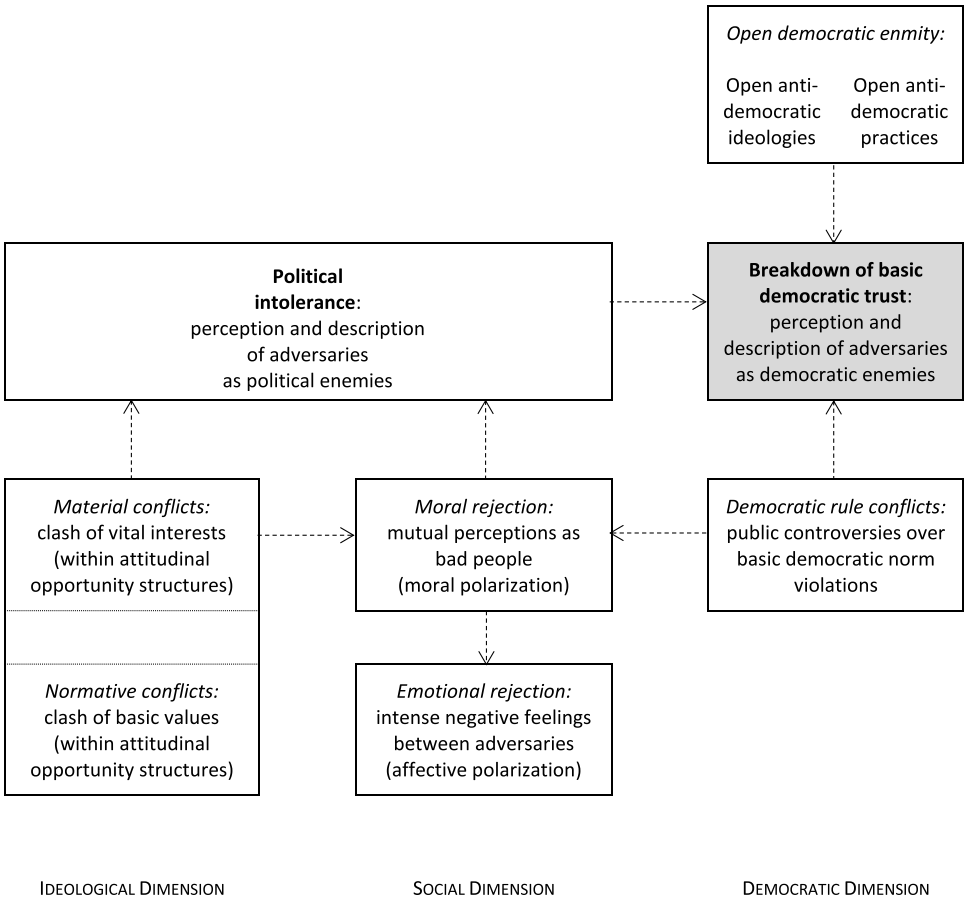

Figure 2. The Causal Structure of Political Polarization
Source: Author elaboration.

in town, when no one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions."[118] In such happy situations, "all the actors in the polity [have] become habituated to the fact that political conflict will be resolved according to the established norms."[119] For Sartori, polarized pluralism was a system in which democratic ground rules were under open assault by self-declared enemies of democracy at both ends of the political spectrum. Their very presence impeded the consolidation of a procedural democratic consensus.

In contemporary processes of polarization, by contrast, the binding force of established democratic norms and institutions is not put into question by open enemies of democracy, but by suspected ones. The hallmark of these processes is not ideological competition but the breakdown of "basic democratic trust," which is, the confidence political actors have in the universal respect of basic democratic norms by all players.[120] Processes of polarization set off when such trust erodes and political actors start doubting the democratic commitments of their contenders. They reach culmination when it collapses, and actors end up perceiving each

[118] Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*, 26.
[119] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 5.
[120] See Schedler, "Basic Democratic Trust."

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other as a clear and present danger to democracy. If escalating ideological and social conflicts may lead adversaries to describe each other as political enemies, escalating democratic distrust may lead them to describe each other as democratic enemies.

In democracy, the "category of the 'enemy' does not disappear but is displaced; it remains pertinent with respect to those who do not accept the democratic 'rules of the game' and who thereby exclude themselves from the political community."[121] In the contemporary era of democratic ambiguity, we cannot identify such democratic enemies on the basis of their self-declared ideological rejection of liberal democracy. Rather, we need to make indirect inferences from what they say and do. Figure 2 illustrates two alternative justifications (outside the realm of open democratic enmity) for such judgements: manifestations of political intolerance (driven by ideological or moral threat perceptions), and public denunciations of other forms of democratic norm violation (democratic threat perceptions). The empirical grounds of such inferences may be firm or flimsy, their theoretical grounds commonsensical or idiosyncratic. They may be formulated in good or bad faith. In any case, they are bound to be contested by the accused.

Consequently, in the historic move from self-declared to designated democratic enemies, common knowledge about the antidemocratic agenda of extreme actors has given way to collective disputes about democratic norm compliance by mainstream actors. Contention over democratic ideals has been superseded by contention over democratic commitments. The result, however, is similar: deep anxieties about the binding force of basic democratic norms. Be it through the commonsensical presence of self-declared antidemocratic actors or the contentious presence of suspected antidemocratic actors, polarized politics spells the end of democratic consolidation. It implies that democracy has ceased to be the only game in town.

In present-day polarized contexts, such democratic fears tend to grip both sides of the political divide. To liberal democrats inside as well as outside academia, it often seems evident who "the enemies of democracy" are: "authoritarian populists."[122] In most cases, however, even if we ("we academics" or "we liberals") tend to overlook or dismiss it, charges of antidemocratic behavior are not one sided but reciprocal. In the discourse of presumptive authoritarians, democratic roles are commonly inverted: it is them who are the defenders of democracy against its enemies. In consequence, both camps tend to see and describe each other as enemies of democracy (while both reject these accusations and present themselves as the better democrats). They both engage in *democratic enemyopia* (the perception "in our eyes" of adversaries as democratic enemies) as well as *democratic enemography* (the description or "drawing" of adversaries as democratic enemies). And while we must not, of course, take such beliefs or portrayals at face value, we should be prepared to see even weak or groundless claims resonate among receptive audiences.

This reciprocal dynamic played out in paradigmatic ways in the United States after the 2020 presidential elections. After having spent his four years in office portraying Democrats as enemies of democracy,[123] Donald Trump escalated his accusations to a wholesale fraudulent campaign about wholesale election fraud that

[121] Mouffe, *The Return of the Political,* 14–15.

[122] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[123] For a broad documentation, see the Trump Twitter Archive (https://www.thetrumparchive.com/).

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persuaded about a third of the electorate that Democrats had stolen the election from him.[124] Today, significant parts of both parties view the other as an existential threat to democracy.[125]

Reciprocal accusations of democratic enmity are by no means exclusive to the United States. To cite just a few recent examples from Latin America: With his nostalgia for military rule and the steady empowerment of the military during his term in office,[126] Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro had earned a solid reputation as authoritarian figure. Yet, toward the end of his mandate, he himself accused the left of planning to impede his reelection through electoral fraud,[127] which propelled followers of his to assault the seat of federal power in Brasilia on 8 January 2022, only days after his duly elected successor had taken office.[128] In Mexico, opponents of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador see him as intolerant, authoritarian populist who strives to concentrate power and subordinate the Supreme Court, electoral authorities, the media, and civil society. He, in turn, denounces them as corrupt coup mongers who aspire to restore the authoritarian ancient regime.[129] In Bolivia's 2019 postelectoral crisis that ended Evo Morales's presidency, massive protests and counterprotests, with sometimes deadly confrontations, were driven by competing narratives of vote rigging versus coup mongering.[130] In the 2021 presidential elections in Peru, the two leading candidates traded dramatic accusations of authoritarianism and, as soon as the hair-tight results were coming in, electoral fraud.[131] President Pedro Castillo's failed self-coup in late 2022 reignited mutual charges of autocratic behavior in dramatic manner.[132]

In contexts of polarization, it is easy to observe mutual accusations of authoritarianism among political actors (though sometimes unilateral ones as well). Is it possible to find counterexamples of polarizing conflicts without such accusations? Is there any prominent agent of polarization whose democratic commitments were uncontested? And is there any who would not question the democratic commitments of his or her adversaries? Have we ever sighted a black swan of polarization among political actors who recognize each other as trustworthy democrats? The

[124] Robert Griffin and Mayesha Quasem, "Crisis of Confidence: How Election 2020 Was Different," June 2021, accessed 22 February 2023, https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publication/crisis-of-confidence; and Nathaniel Persily and Charles Stewart III, "The Miracle and Tragedy of the 2020 US Election," *Journal of Democracy* 32 (April 2021): 159–78.

[125] Jennifer Agiesta and Ariel Edwards-Levy, "CNN Poll: Most Americans Feel Democracy Is Under Attack in the US," *CNN*, 15 September 2021, accessed 23 February 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/15/politics/cnn-poll-most-americans-democracy-under-attack/.

[126] Karabekir Akkoyunlu and José Antonio Lima, "Brazil's Stealth Military Intervention," *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 14 (April 2022): 31–54. Tom Phillips, "Lula launches campaign to reclaim Brazilian presidency from Bolsonaro," *Guardian* (7 May 2022), accessed 26 February 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/07/lula-launches-campaign-to-reclaim-brazilian-presidency-from-bolsanaro.

[127] Naira Galarraga Gortázar, "Bolsonaro Agita el Fantasma del Fraude en las Próximas Elecciones con Videos Viejos y Teorías Desmentidas," *El País* (30 July 2021), accessed 26 February 2023, https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-07-30/bolsonaro-agita-el-fantasma-del-fraude-en-las-proximas-elecciones-con-videos-viejos-y-teorias-desmentidas.html.

[128] Jack Nicas, "What Drove a Mass Attack on Brazil's Capital? Mass Delusion," *New York Times* (9 January 2023), accessed 28 February 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/world/americas/brazil-riots-bolsonaro-conspiracy-theories.html.

[129] Alejandro Monsiváis-Carrillo, "Happy Winners, Sore Partisans? Political Trust, Partisanship, and the Populist Assault on Electoral Integrity in Mexico," *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 15 (April 2023): 72–95.

[130] Fabrice Lehoucq, "Bolivia's Citizen Revolt," *Journal of Democracy* 31 (July 2020): 130–44.

[131] Paula Muñoz, "Peru Goes Populist," *Journal of Democracy* 32 (July 2021): 48–62.

[132] See, for instance, Inés Santaeulalia, "Los Rostros de las Protestas en Perú: 'Estaremos Aquí Hasta la Batalla Final,'" *El País* (18 December 2022), accessed 26 February 2023, https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-12-18/los-rostros-de-las-protestas-en-peru-estaremos-aqui-hasta-la-batalla-final.html.

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answer, I believe, is negative. As it appears, genuine cases of polarization, in which entrenched political "enemy camps…radically oppos[e] each other,"[133] almost invariably involve public controversies over actors' democratic commitments.

Among the twenty most-cited articles on polarization (in Table A; see supplemental materials online), only one makes a substantive reference to "mutual distrust" among actors who perceive each other as "existential threat."[134] Outside the top twenty, the idea that polarized camps are "mutually distrustful"[135] is more common.[136] The precise domains of mutual fear and distrust tend to remain unclear, however. What is it political camps are fearing of each other? Few authors have been recognizing the pervasiveness of basic democratic distrust in contexts of polarization.

In their Southeast Asian case studies, Slater and Arugay observe that processes of polarization are driven by controversies over the abuse of power by polarizing figures, with reciprocal accusations of democratic norm transgression.[137] In their analysis of polarization in Turkey under Erdoğan, Laebens and Öztürk emphasize the mutuality of both economic and democratic threat perceptions: "ruling party partisans are almost as likely as opposition party partisans to perceive other parties as threatening to their rights and well-being."[138] In his conceptual discussion of populism and polarization, Roberts describes the partisan capture of democratic institutions and the ensuing contestation over their democratic nature as a subtype of polarized politics he labels "institutional polarization."[139] Finally, in their comparative work on polarization, McCoy and Somer find that polarizing actors often activate deep "formative rifts" over national identity and pursue "transformative" projects of democratic exclusion or inclusion against intense opposition.[140] Because these conflicts touch upon the very foundations of the democratic polity, they involve conflicting assessments over the nature and carriers of democratic progress and retrocession.[141] Overall, such references to reciprocal democratic threat perceptions are exceptional, though, and tend to lack systematic elaboration. Even though mutual accusations of antidemocratic behavior among protagonists of polarizing politics abound, they have received scant attention in the polarization literature.

Conclusion

Let us draw together the main points of our excursion into the inhospitable terrain of political polarization. It is quite straightforward to comprehend political

[133] Arbatli and Rosenberg, "United We Stand," 288–89.

[134] Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences," 136, 141.

[135] McCoy and Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization," 234.

[136] See, for example, Abramowitz, "The Polarized American Electorate," 647–48; Carothers and Feldmann, "The Intensification of Divisive Politics," 1; García and Mallen, "Polarization," 63; McCoy, "Hyper-Polarization," 6; Reiljan, "'Fear and Loathing,'" 377; Murat Somer, "Old and New Polarizations and Failed Democratizations in Turkey," in *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics*, ed. Güneş Murat Tezcür (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4.

[137] Dan Slater and Aries A. Arugay, "Polarizing Figures: Executive Power and Institutional Conflict in Asian Democracies," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (January 2018): 92–106, at 93.

[138] Melis G. Laebens and Aykut Öztürk, "Partisanship and Autocratization: Polarization, Power Asymmetry, and Partisan Social Identities in Turkey," *Comparative Political Studies* 54 (February 2021): 245–279, at 247.

[139] Roberts, "Populism and Polarization," 18–19.

[140] Somer and McCoy, "Transformations Through Polarizations," 15–17.

[141] Somer and McCoy, "Transformations Through Polarizations," 11.

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polarization as a form of public conflict (rather than a mere clustering of ideological dispositions) and to establish its generic character as an entrenched political confrontation at the highest level of the polity between imagined communities whose antagonism tends to absorb, dominate, or displace other cleavages. This formal, ideal-typical determination of the structure of macro-polarization allows us to advise, in the name of conceptual validity, against uses of the term that equate it with mere programmatic differentiation among parties. It does not resolve, however, the more controversial task of identifying, in the name of conceptual differentiation, the defining traits that distinguish polarization from "normal" forms of bipartisan competition. There has been little clarity or consensus about the criteria that turn ordinary democratic conflict into an extraordinary situation of polarization.

The literature has highlighted two sources of conflict that might push a democratic polity from healthy to pathological competition: ideological and affective distance between political camps. No doubt, both are hugely important in polarized polities. It may be something like "an iron law of polarization" that it creates deep emotional divides between the parties in conflict. These need not derive from substantive disagreements, but often they do go hand in hand with jarring clashes over public policies. Both ideological discord and affective aversion are standard ingredients of vibrant democratic competition, however. In line with longstanding intuitions in the literature, I have suggested that they turn into extraordinary, polarizing conflicts when they give rise to political intolerance, that is, when political contenders turn from rule-bound agonism among adversaries to unbound antagonism among enemies.

When actors, driven by ideological fervor or moral outrage, withdraw democratic recognition from their adversaries, their designated enemies are likely to take notice. Treated as political enemies, they have reason to see their adversaries as democratic enemies. But rarely is this the only reason for doing so. In polarizing contexts, political intolerance is unlikely to be the only transgression of basic democratic norms. Given the self-reinforcing nature of enemy perceptions, democratic grievances are likely to pile up. Claims and counterclaims of democratic rule violations tend to harden into narratives in which both sides describe each other as existential threats to democracy.

I have proposed to conceive such disputes over democratic commitments and the concomitant destruction of basic democratic trust as the third dimension of polarization. Bringing this democratic dimension back into the debate places procedural uncertainties into the center of polarizing conflicts. As it implies, the primary fear that grips the participants in polarized politics may not stem from perceived threats against their economic well-being, physical safety, group identity, worldviews, ways of life, or moral convictions. Instead, it may arise from perceived threats against the democratic order. Rather than fearing the loss of material benefits or the destruction of moral values, they may fear the subversion of democracy. The institutional implications of such fears are dramatic. In essence, they spell the end of democratic consolidation. When political contenders come to see each other as enemies of democracy, democracy stares into the abyss. The notion that it may constitute "the only game in town" becomes naïve, a nostalgic echo from a distant past. Once its participants cannot be trusted anymore to heed its fundamental rules, the game starts dissolving, and the town as well.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available at *Political Science Quarterly* online.

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